

State-Defined Alternate Diplomas



OBJECTIVES

1. To clarify what ESSA says about the state-defined alternate diploma
2. To generate discussion about the pros and cons of developing a state-defined alternate diploma
3. To summarize the steps some states have taken to develop a state-defined alternate diploma
4. To generate ideas for needed research on alternate diplomas and outcomes

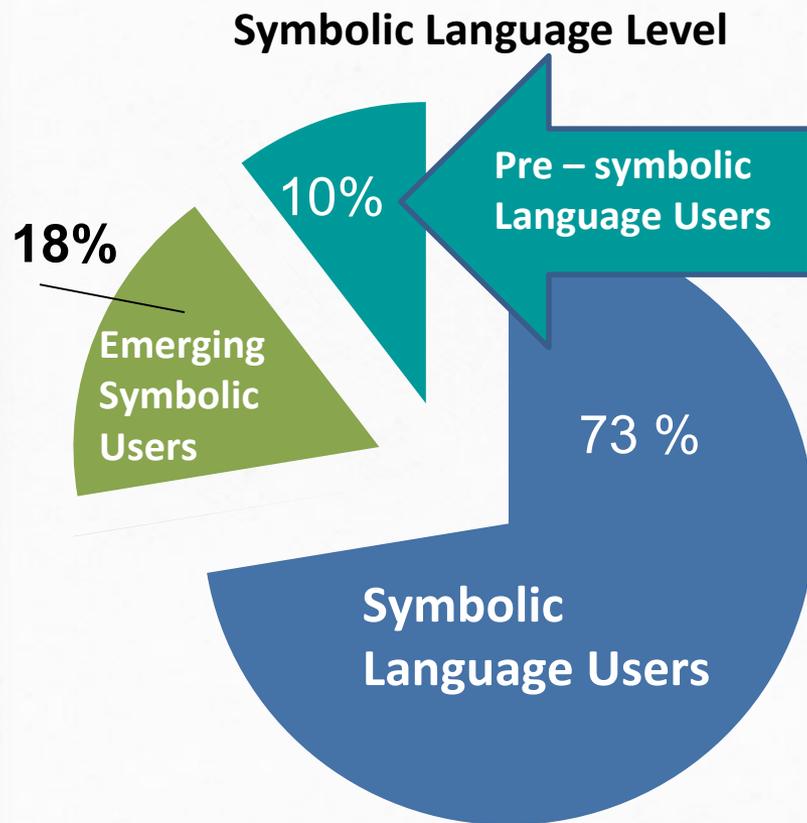
What Is A State-Defined Alternate Diploma?

(Does your state have one?)

History of Education for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

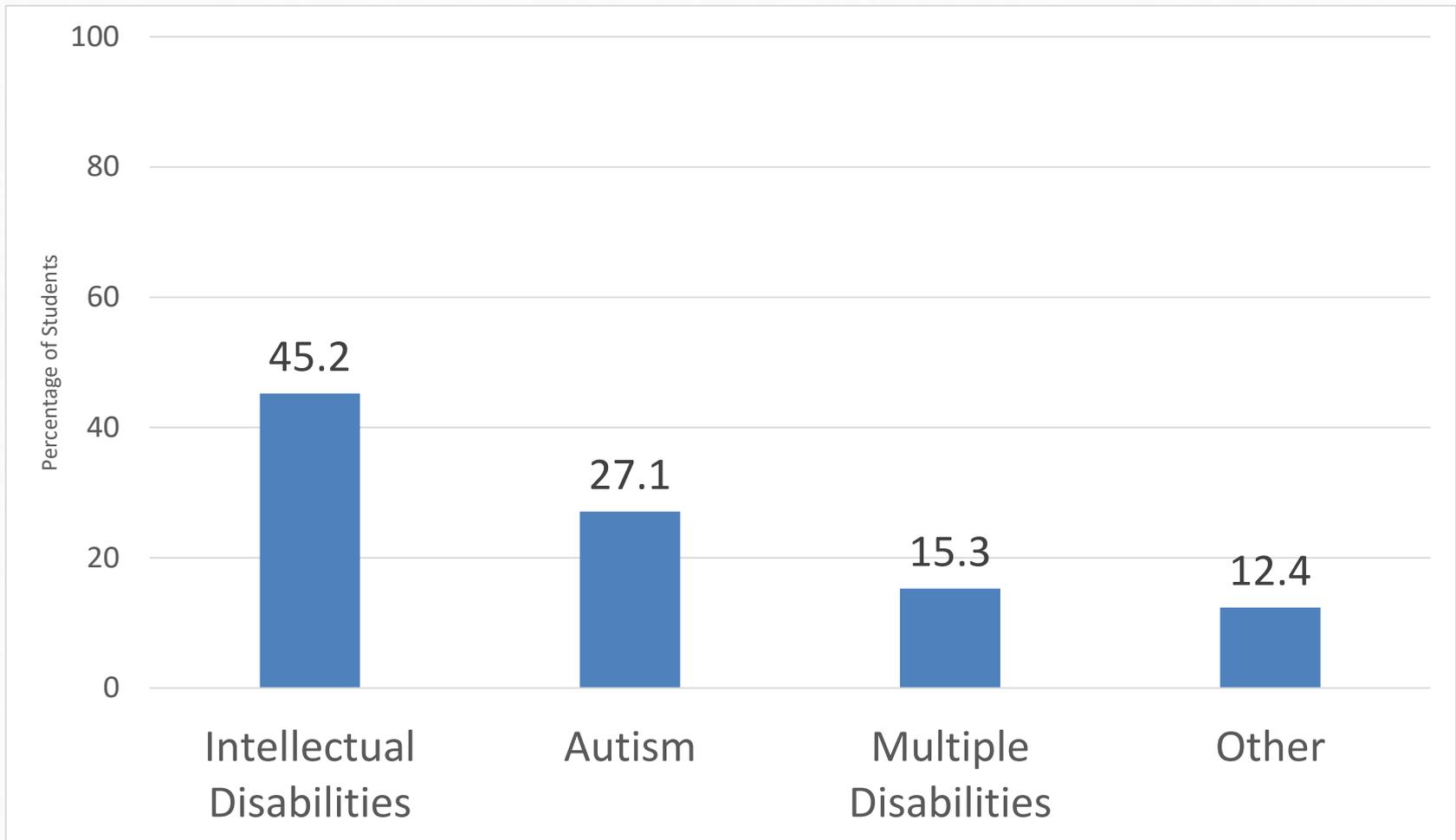
- IDEA 1997 required the development of alternate assessments by 2000 for students unable to participate in regular assessments
- Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities were first “named” in 2003, when ESEA allowed for up to 1% to be included in **accountability** as proficient on an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards
- Accountability attention has resulted in greatly increased attention to academic instruction for these students

Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities



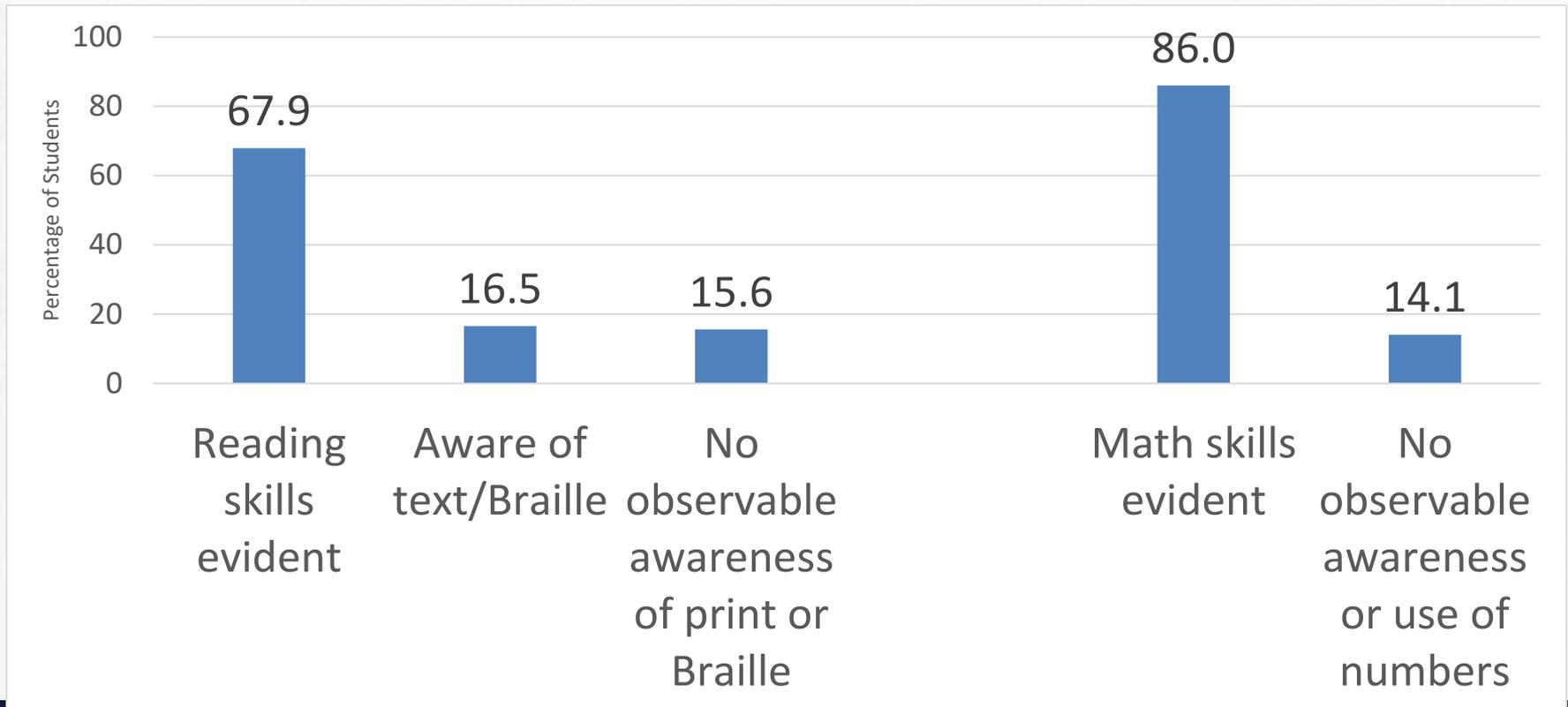
Most students with significant cognitive disabilities have either emerging symbolic or symbolic communication skills.

Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities



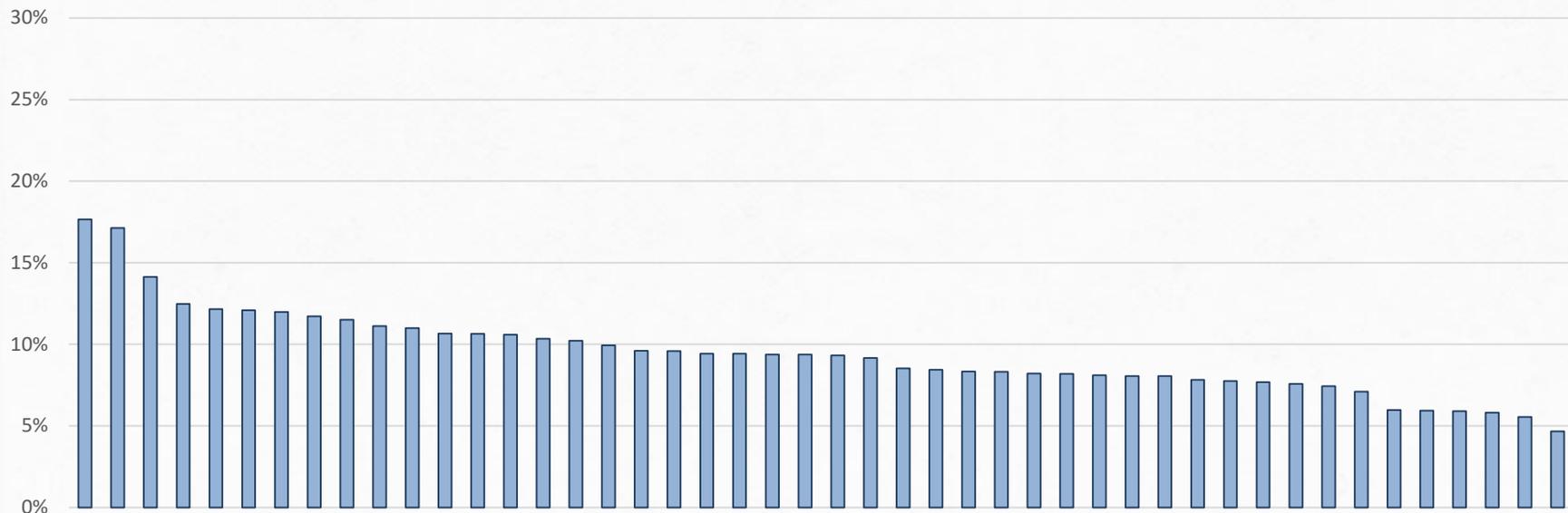
Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities – cont.

Reading and Math Skills



Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities – cont.

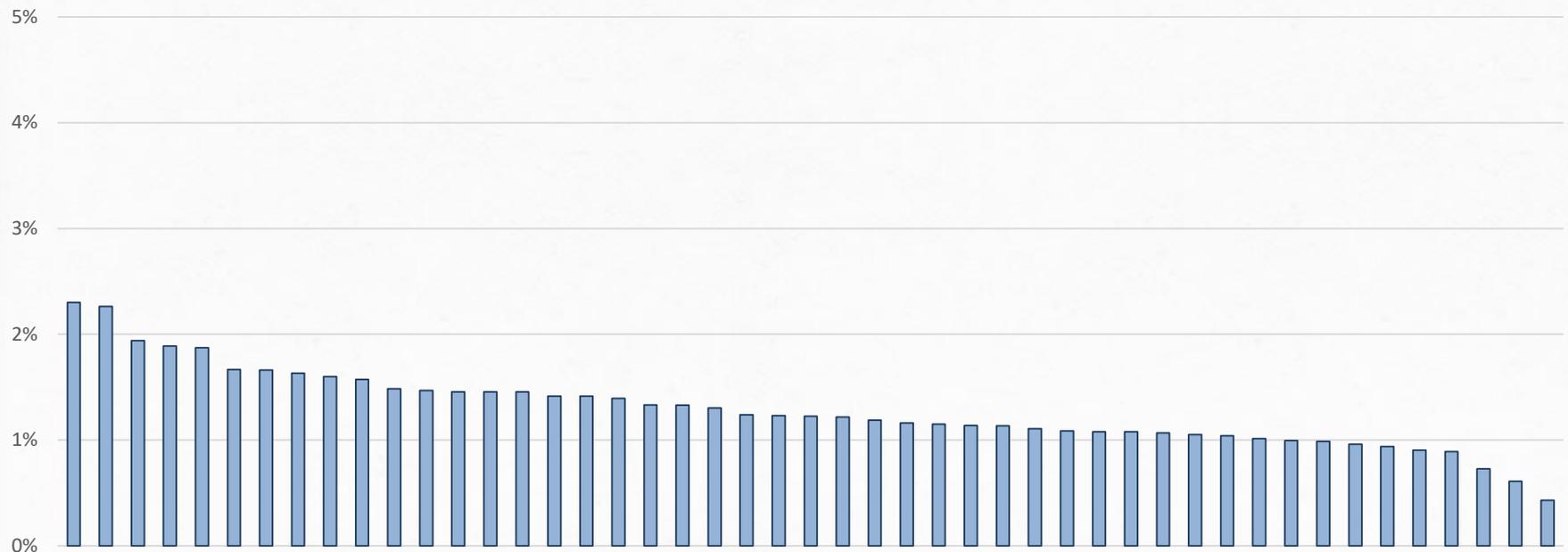
Percentage of Grade 8 Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities (Based on Only Students with Disabilities) Varies by State*



*Based on 2015-16 Participation in the Alternate Reading Assessment

Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities – cont.

Percentage of Grade 8 Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities (Based on **all** Grade 8 Tested Students) Varies by State*



*Based on 2015-16 Participation in the Alternate Reading Assessment

Many Lessons Learned!

- **Students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn academic content!**
- **Questions were raised about why schools/states were not recognizing the “proficiency” of students with significant cognitive disabilities against the alternate achievement standards – no end-of-school document existed to recognize their achievement.**

Many Lessons Learned! – cont.

- **Although accountability attention resulted in increased attention to academic instruction for these students, it also tended to increase the number of students taking the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards**
- **Concerns grew about the wrong students being assigned to the alternate assessment**

ESSA Language on State-Defined Alternate Diplomas

ESSA Language

- **Definition of “state-defined alternate diploma” included in Sec. 8101. Definitions (see Brief)**
- **Specifically designated for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities assessed using the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards (and placed a 1.0% cap on **participation** in the alternate assessment)**

ESSA Language – cont.

- **The state-defined alternate diploma must meet three requirements:**
 - ✓ **Standards-based**
 - ✓ **Aligned with the State requirements for the regular high school diploma**
 - ✓ **Obtained within the same period for which the State ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education under section 612(a)(1) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(1))**

ESSA Language – cont.

- **PLUS, the state-defined alternate diploma must meet the implied condition of being state defined!**

[This may be a challenge for states that currently allow districts to set graduation requirements]

ESSA Language – Questions?

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Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Title I of the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), allows for the inclusion in graduation accountability of a diploma option for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAC) in Table 1. The inclusion of state-defined alternate diploma in the Title I adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) accountability measure.



See Brief, *Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities* for considerations about each of the four requirements (3 directly stated plus 1 inferred) for the state-defined alternate diploma

https://nceo.info/Resources/publications/OnlinePubs/NTACT_Brief/default.html

Considerations for Deciding Whether to Offer a State- Defined Alternate Diploma

Considerations

- **Do current diploma options in your state adequately meet the needs of all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities?**
 - **Viable pathway to meaningful access to college, careers, and community?**
 - **Reflect an opportunity to earn a diploma that shows completion of a rigorous standards-based program of study?**

Considerations – cont.

- **Do stakeholders want a diploma for students with significant cognitive disabilities?**
 - **Has a discussion occurred with educators and parents of students with significant cognitive disabilities?**
 - **If educators and parents are positive, what do businesses, industry councils, and educational institutions think?**

Considerations – cont.

- **Do students with significant cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to learn rigorous standards-based content?**
 - **Is it possible that an state-defined alternate diploma would increase opportunity to learn?**
 - **Can educators be prepared for this shift toward “student stakes” for students with significant cognitive disabilities?**

What Do You Think?

Mostly Pro?

Mostly Con?

Steps for Creating a State-Defined Alternate Diploma

Steps for Creating...

- 1. Define the meaning of “state-defined alternate diploma”**
 - **What would be the purpose for having a state-defined alternate diploma?**
 - **What would it mean if a student earned a state-defined alternate diploma?**

Steps for Creating...

- 2. Examine policy adjustments that need to be made to incorporate the State-defined alternate diploma into current educational policies**
 - **Would the student who receives it be on track to pursue postsecondary education or employment (consistent with WIOA)?**

Steps for Creating... – cont.

- 3. Determine the course and exit exam requirements that will align with those requirements for the regular diploma**
 - **Similar course content requirements?**
 - **If there is a state exit-exam, is there also an exit exam for students with significant cognitive disabilities?**

Steps for Creating... – cont.

- 4. Revise assessment participation requirements to ensure that only those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in alternate exit exams to earn a State-defined alternate diploma**
 - **Check participation rates at high school level**
 - **Check proficiency rates at high school level**

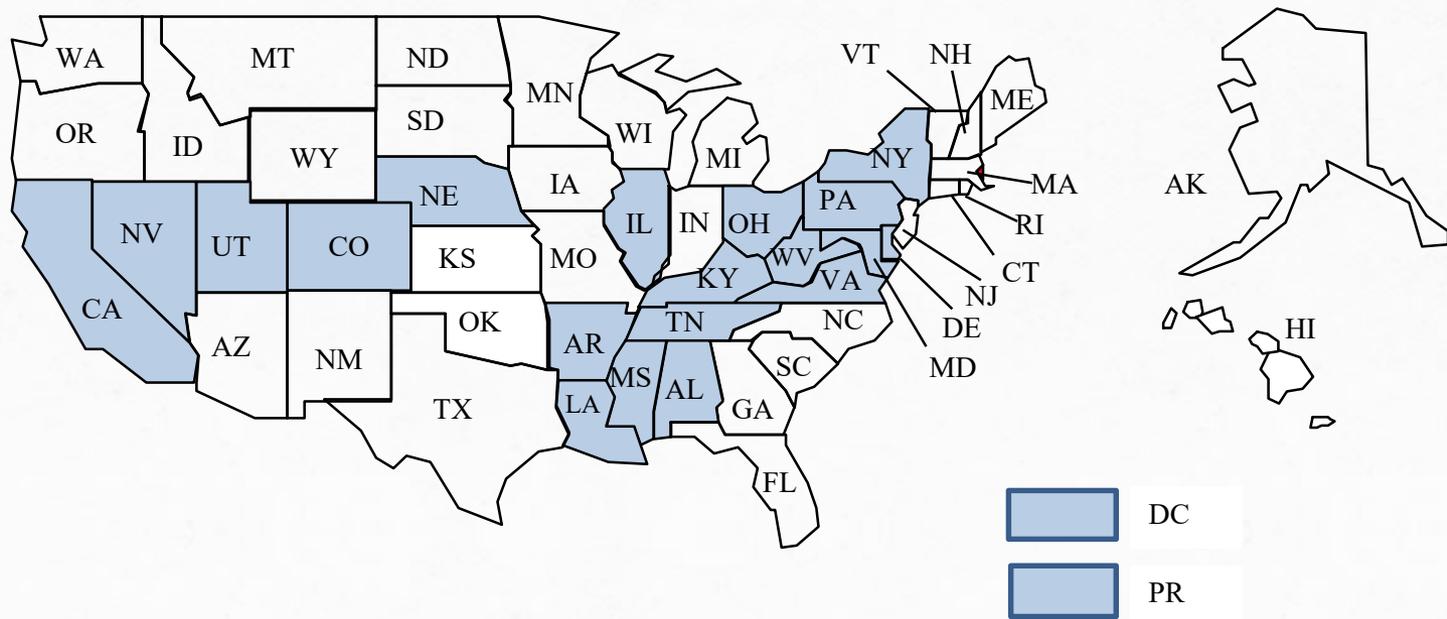
Steps for Creating... – cont.

- 5. Provide professional development to promote access to the general curriculum and opportunity to learn for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities**
 - **Check available resources from the two alternate assessment consortia**
 - ✓ **NCSC: <https://wiki.ncscpartners.org>**
 - ✓ **DLM: <http://dlmpd.com>**

What Are States Doing?

Alternate Diploma Community of Practice

- **21 states participate in a Community of Practice**



Alternate Diploma Community of Practice

- **States are looking for conversations about**
 - **Whether to pursue a state-defined alternate diploma**
 - **What states that have decided to develop a state-defined alternate diploma are doing**

States with "Alternate Diplomas"

- **Alabama**
- **Florida**
- **Louisiana**
- **Mississippi**
- **Tennessee**
- **Utah**
- **West Virginia**

Needed Research

- **Effect on alternate assessment participation rates**
- **Outcomes for students who earn a state-defined alternate diploma (postsecondary education, competitive integrated employment)**
- **Other ideas?**

RESOURCES

- Thurlow, M., Albus, D., Lazarus, S., & Vang, M. (2014). *Graduation policies for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in states' AA-AAS (Synthesis Report 97)*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.
- Thurlow, M., Test, D., Lazarus, S., Klare, M., & Fowler, C. (2016). *Considerations for Developing State-Defined Alternate Diplomas for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.
- Thurlow, M. L., Wu, Y., Quenemoen, R. F., & Towles, E. (2016, January). *Characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities (NCSC Brief #8)*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center and State Collaborative.

THANK YOU



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