

# 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 identify next steps the state will take (if any)

# AGENDA

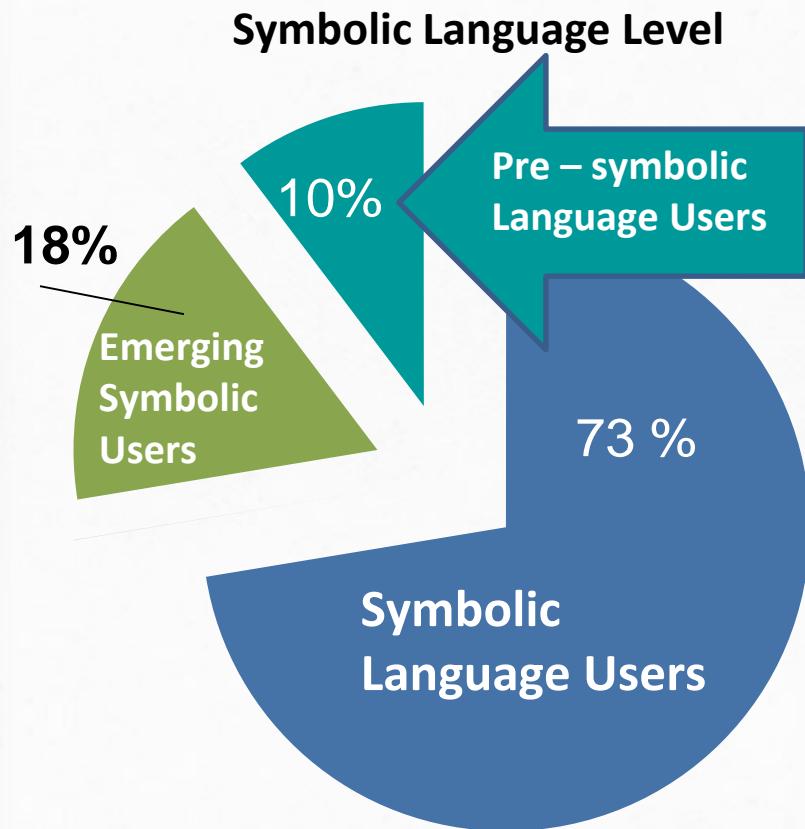
- Introductions
- Who Are We Talking About?
- Current Status in Your State
- ESSA Language on State-Defined Alternate Diplomas
- Considerations for Deciding Whether to Offer a State-Defined Alternate Diploma
- Steps for Creating a State-Defined Alternate Diploma
- Questions?

# Who Are We Talking About?

# History of Education for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

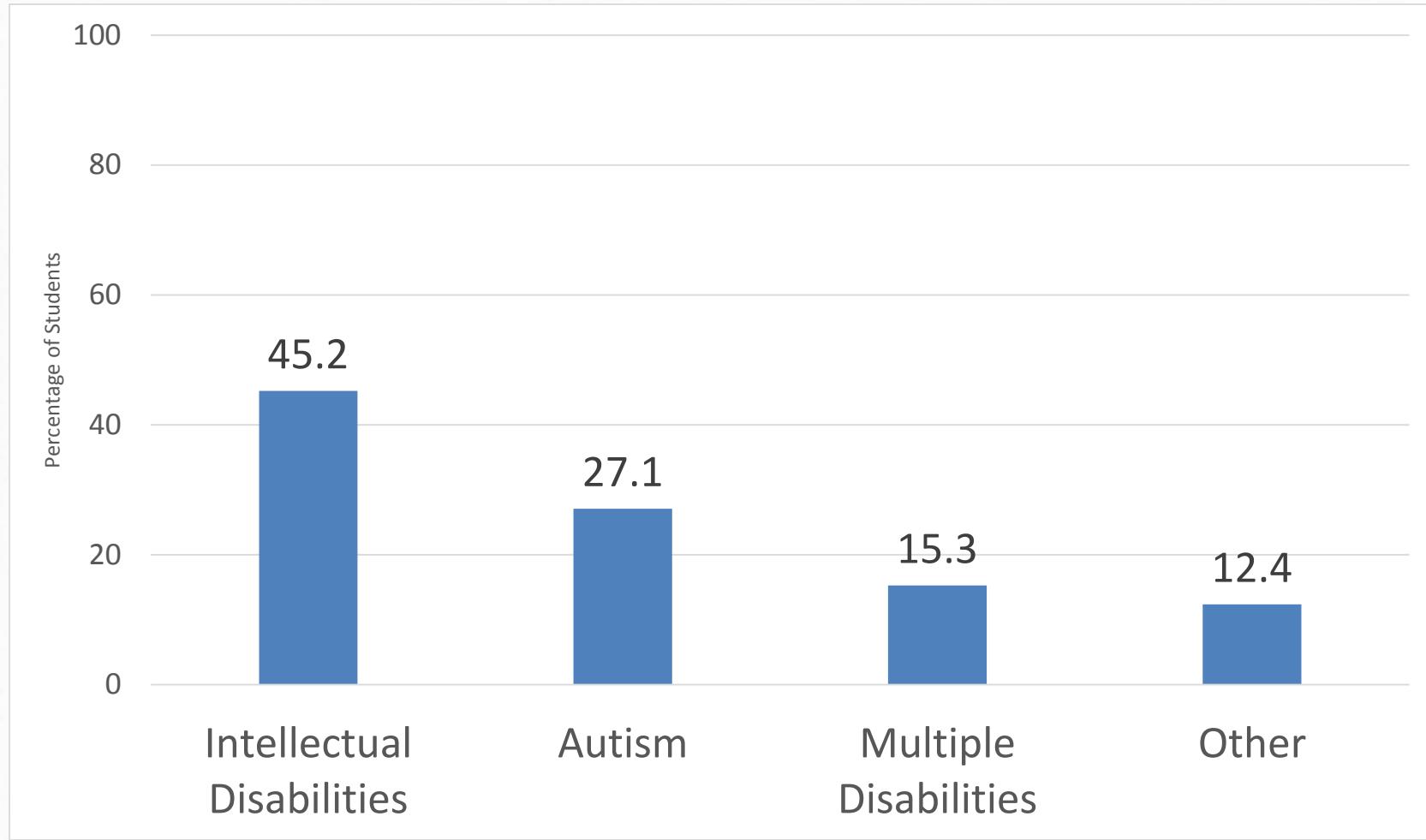
- IDEA 1997 required the development of alternate assessments by 2000 for students unable to participate in regular assessments
- Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities were first “named” in 2003, when ESEA allowed for up to 1% to be included in an alternate assessment based on alternative 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



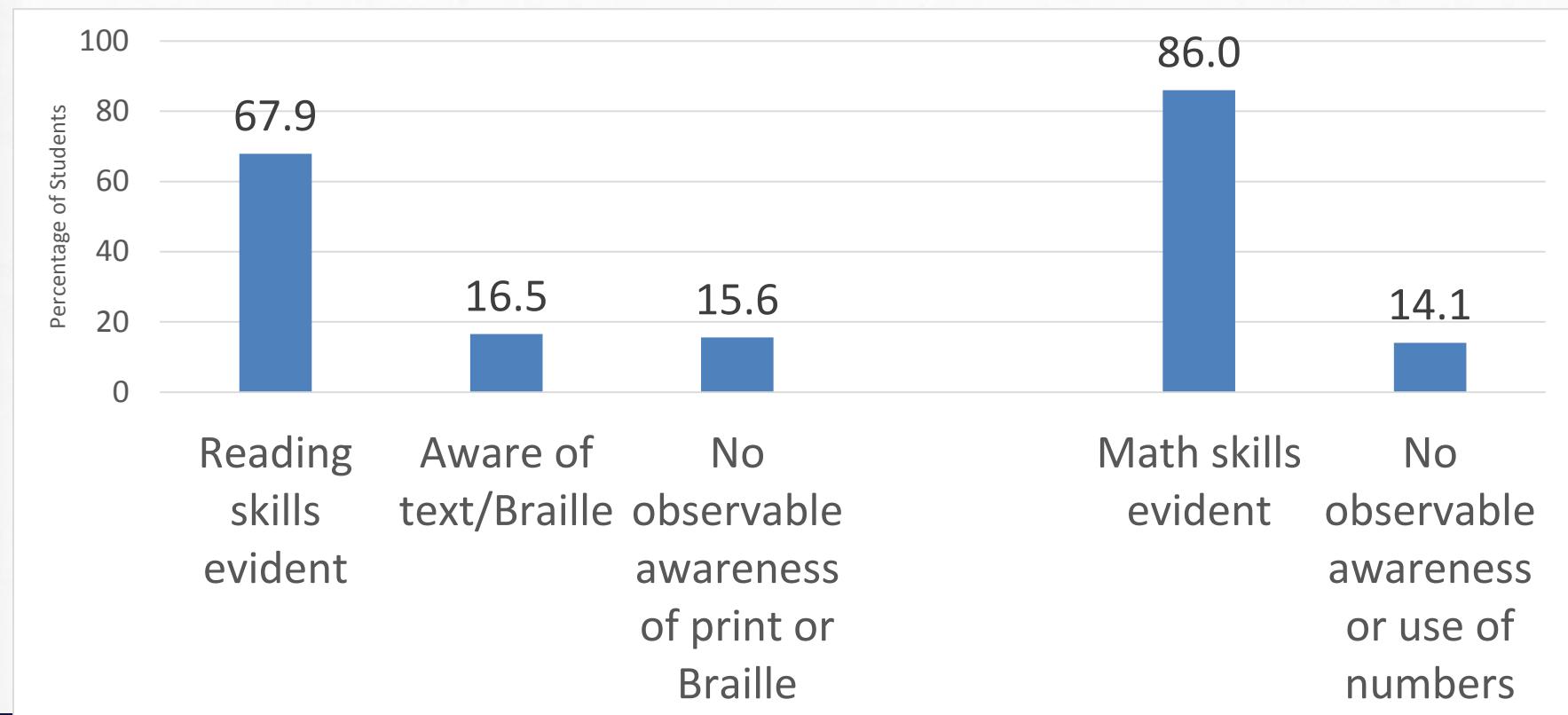
Most students with significant cognitive disabilities have either emerging symbolic or symbolic communication skills.

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



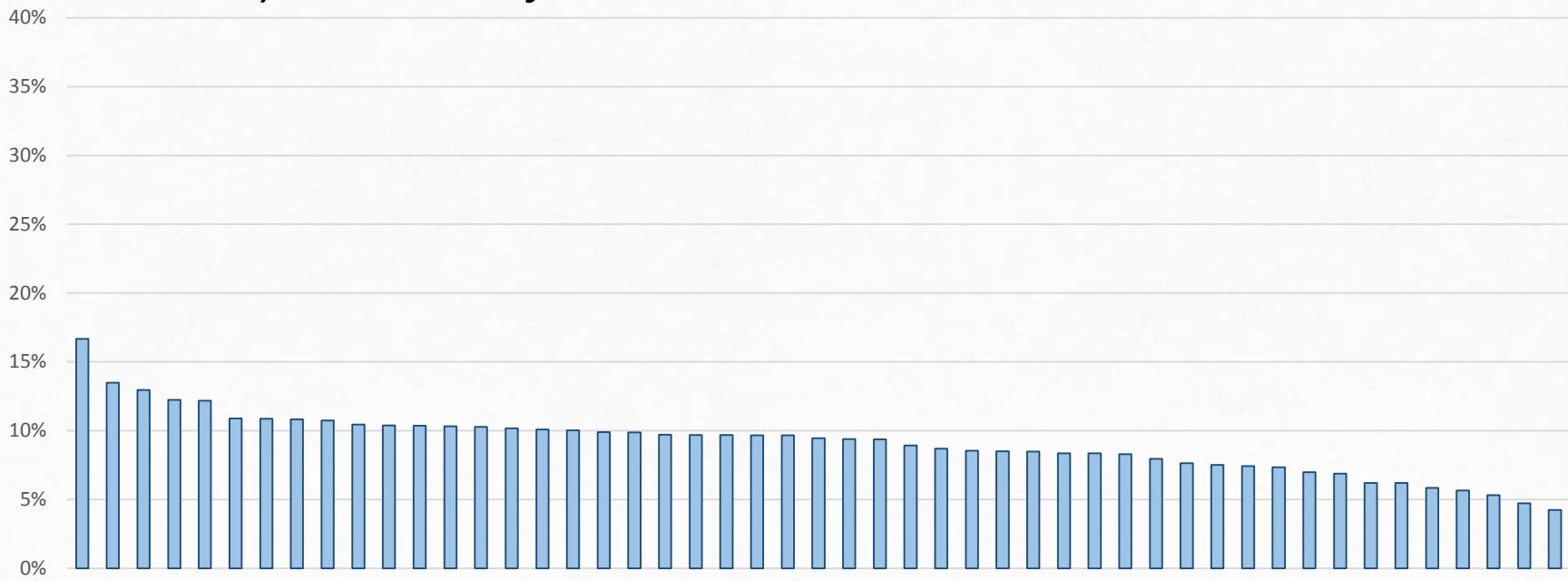
# Who Are the Students? Characteristics of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities – cont.

## Reading and Math Skills



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

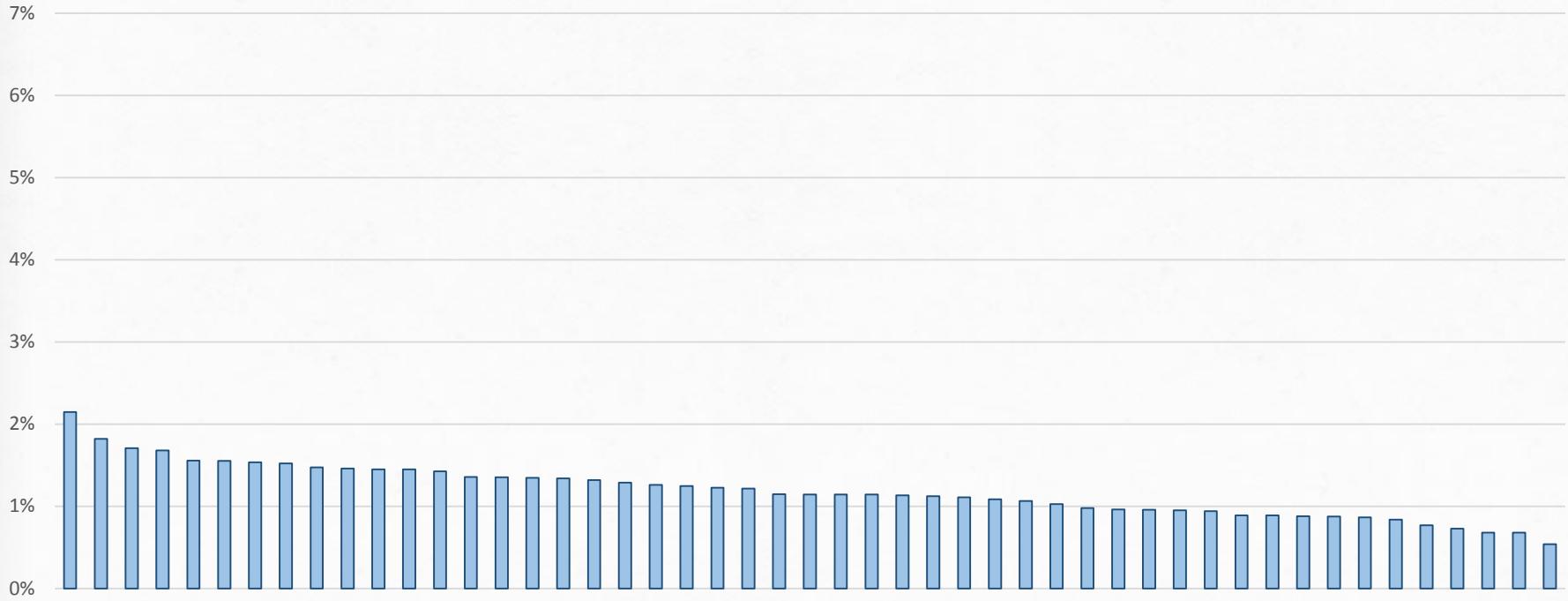
Percentage of Grade 8 Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities (Based on Only Students with Disabilities) Varies by State\*



\*Based on 2013-14 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 Students)  
Varies by State\*



# 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

# 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?

November 2014  
Jointly published by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT)

**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) allows an every student graduation accountability for the inclusion in graduation accountability of diplomas offered for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AAAS). See Table 1. The inclusion of state-defined alternate diplomas in the Title I adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) accountability formula.

**NCEO**  
National Center on Educational Outcomes

**NTACT**  
National Technical Assistance Center on Transition

**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**

# 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?

# 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>

# 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.

# Group Discussion

1. What are the pros and cons of developing a state-defined alternate diploma for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?
2. What is happening in your state for graduating students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

# NEXT STEPS

## 1. What's Next?

- Start a Community of Practice (CoP) around Alternative Diplomas OR get email information from us, OR...?

## 2. If CoP, what timeline for meetings? Monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly...other?

## 3. If CoP, what happens at next meeting?

- Start an action plan for your state and share with the group? OR...Other ideas?

# THANK YOU



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