NCEO Tool 13

Developing an Assessment Participation Action Plan: A Tool for State Leaders

1% Toolkit

NCEO
National Center on
Educational Outcomes

Developing an Assessment Participation Action Plan:

A Tool for State Leaders

Andrew R. Hinkle, Tiffany Katanyoutanant, Kathy Strunk, Markie McNeilly, Virginia A. Ressa, Sylvia Kwon, Sheryl S. Lazarus, Katherine Nagle, Martha L. Thurlow, and Bryan Hemberg
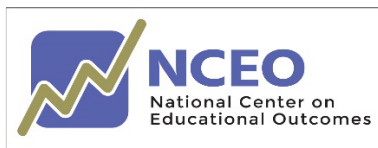
A publication of

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

In collaboration with

NCEO's 1.0% Community of Practice (CoP)

Acknowledgments

Developing an Assessment Participation Action Plan:
A Tool for State Leaders

Federal regulations require that states administer an annual state assessment to students in grades 3-8 and once in high school. The assessments are aligned to state academic content standards and are used to measure student progress toward mastering the standards. State assessments provide information that education leaders and policymakers can use to make decisions about where to allocate needed resources and support. They offer an opportunity to understand how local schools are meeting the educational needs of students and how all students across the state's districts and schools are doing. State tests also reveal performance gaps across student groups in the state, thus providing information that can be used to improve programming and provide targeted resources and support.

Some states also mandate interim (or benchmark) assessments which are often used to measure growth, make instructional decisions, and look for patterns across groups of students. This tool focuses on the federally-required statewide general assessments and statewide alternate assessments in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science administered in grades 3-8 and once in high school. However, the tool can be easily adapted to develop a student assessment participation action plan for state-mandated interim assessments.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires the participation of all students (100 percent) in state tests. For students with disabilities, test participation is also required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). ESSA requires states to assess 95 percent of all students and 95 percent of students with disabilities in order to meet federal accountability requirements.

Another important connection to the issue of reaching a 95 percent student assessment participation rate has to do with the state's alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS). ESSA reaffirmed that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, a very small number of students, should participate in the AA-AAAS. ESSA requires that the total number of students assessed in each content area (i.e., reading/language arts, mathematics, and science) using the AA-AAAS does not exceed 1.0 percent of the total number of all students who are assessed in these content areas statewide.

States may apply for a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education no later than 90 days prior to the testing window if they think they will exceed the 1.0 percent cap. However, in order for a state to receive a waiver, it must meet the ESSA requirement that 95 percent of all students, as well as 95 percent of students with disabilities, participated in the assessment. If states applying for a waiver do not meet the 95 percent assessment participation requirement, they will not be granted a waiver.

The purpose of this resource is to provide a tool for states that wish to improve student assessment participation. The tool provides guidance on how state leaders can develop an

assessment participation action plan. It describes a series of steps that support the development of the action plan. These steps include (a) forming teams for designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the action plan; (b) collecting and analyzing state assessment participation data; (c) collecting and analyzing district assessment participation data; (d) compiling state contextual information; (e) identifying the state's challenges to reach 95 percent participation; (f) designing and implementing action plan steps; (g) monitoring implementation of the plan; and (h) evaluating the plan.

States may customize the tool as needed to meet their needs. See https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/StateAssessmentParticipationActionPlan.docx to download the Microsoft Word version of this resource.

Developing an Assessment Participation Action Plan: A Tool for State Leaders

This resource is designed to be used by state education leaders and staff to develop action plans that identify steps to increase student participation in statewide assessments. The U.S. Department of Education requires the participation of all (100 percent) students in state tests. For students with disabilities, test participation is also required by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). ESSA requires states to assess at least 95 percent of all students and students with disabilities in order to meet federal accountability requirements, underscoring the importance of encouraging student participation in testing.

For states that do not meet the 95 percent participation rate, or for states that wish to improve their current participation rates, developing an action plan is a good place to start. Developing an action plan involves a close analysis of prior student assessment participation, examination of state and local contextual factors that influence participation, and identification of strategies and activities that might be most effective at the state, district, and school levels for encouraging student participation in statewide assessments.

This tool is designed to guide state-level leaders through the necessary steps and considerations leading up to the development of an assessment participation action plan:

- Step 1: Form Teams for Designing, Implementing, Monitoring, and Evaluating an Assessment Participation Action Plan
- Step 2: Collect and Analyze State Assessment Participation Data
- Step 3: Collect and Analyze District Assessment Participation Data
- Step 4: Compile State Contextual Information
- Step 5: Identify State Level Challenges to 95 Percent Participation Rate
- Step 6: Design Action Plan Steps for Implementation and Monitoring
- Step 7: Evaluate the Effectiveness of the Plan

After completing this guide's steps and suggestions, users will be equipped to implement an action plan that addresses state assessment participation with consideration of district and school contexts and needs.

Step 1: Form Teams for Designing, Implementing, Monitoring, and Evaluating an Assessment Participation Action Plan

Developing a comprehensive action plan necessitates identifying the education community members and partners who will be part of each stage of the work (design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation). Members of the teams might include:

- State Education Agency (SEA) staff, including those who support instruction of students

with disabilities (e.g., special education, general education, and English learner specialists), assessment, accountability and data specialists
- District/school administrators
- School staff, including those who support instruction of students with disabilities (e.g., special education, general education, and English learner specialists), assessment, and data staff
- Parents
- Students
- Community leaders

Questions to Consider Related to the Action Plan Team

- Who are the people best positioned to design the action plan by providing insights in your state, district, or school contexts as well as identify appropriate actions or strategies for assessment participation?

- Who needs to be involved in communicating and disseminating the action plan? Which groups will your team need to support the implementation of the plan?

- Who are all the education community members and partners that will need to review and approve the action plan? Action plan design requires consideration of all the different education community members and partners who will be instrumental in designing and implementing an effective plan that improves student participation in statewide assessments.

- Who will monitor action plan implementation?

- Who will evaluate action plan success?

When identifying education community members and partners to be involved in action plan design and implementation, it is helpful to think about the stages that will be part of your plan and who will be tasked with implementing steps during each stage (design, implementation,

monitoring, and evaluation). For example, when designing your plan, who is best positioned to analyze prior participation data and provide insights? In delineating action plan tasks and responsibilities, your plan should leverage existing experts or teams. If not, you will need to identify those who have the capacity to learn the necessary skills to implement specific tasks. Use Table 1 to identify the people who will be included in each stage of the action plan (design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation) and the responsibilities each person will take on.

Table 1. Action Plan Participants and their Responsibilities

Participant name	Participant role	Which action plan stage(s) will this participant support?	List all participant responsibilities
		o Design o Implementation o Monitoring o Evaluation	
		o Design o Implementation o Monitoring o Evaluation	
		o Design o Implementation o Monitoring o Evaluation	
		o Design o Implementation o Monitoring o Evaluation	
		o Design o Implementation o Monitoring o Evaluation	

Step 2: Collect and Analyze State Assessment Participation Data

To better understand the assessment system context in your state, first specify all the general and alternate assessments that are required under your state's assessment system. For each assessment, identify the students, content areas, and grade levels at which each assessment is administered. This step should be conducted by stakeholders who will participate in the design stage of plan development.

What was the overall participation rate for each assessment? What was the participation rate for subgroups of students, including students with disabilities? Look for patterns over time and across content areas.

Use Tables 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, and 3c to analyze participation rates from the previous school years;

add additional rows as needed. For analysis, include data from the most recent three school years.

Table 2a. State General Assessment Participation Rates by Content Area and Grades Administered

Assessment Content Area	Grade(s) Administered	All Student Participation Rate		
		(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
Reading/Language Arts	Grade 3			
	Grade 4			
	Grade 5			
	Grade 6			
	Grade 7			
	Grade 8			
	High School			
Mathematics	Grade 3			
	Grade 4			
	Grade 5			
	Grade 6			
	Grade 7			
	Grade 8			
	High School			
Science	Elementary			
	Middle			
	High School			

Table 2b. State Alternate Assessment Participation Rates by Content Area and Grades Administered

Assessment Content Area	Grade(s) Administered	All Students Participation Rate		
		(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
Reading/Language Arts	Grade 3			
	Grade 4			
	Grade 5			
	Grade 6			
	Grade 7			
	Grade 8			
	High School			
Mathematics	Grade 3			
	Grade 4			
	Grade 5			

Assessment Content Area	Grade(s) Administered	All Students Participation Rate		
		(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
	Grade 6			
	Grade 7			
	Grade 8			
	High School			
Science	Elementary			
	Middle			
	High School			

Questions to Consider During Data Analyses

- What was the overall student participation rate for each assessment?

- What do these data tell you about participation rates in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science?

- What do these data tell you about participation at different grade levels? In Tables 3a, 3b, and 3c, identify the overall participation rates for student subgroups for each content area in the three previous school years. Subgroups may be added, removed, or renamed to meet your state's reporting categories. If desired, copy the tables for other state assessment content areas in your state assessment system.

Table 3a. Overall Student Subgroup Participation Rates on State Reading/Language Arts Assessments

Subgroup	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
American Indian or Alaska Native			
Asian			
Black or African American			
Hispanic or Latino			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander			
White			
Multiracial			

Subgroup	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)
English Learners			
Students with Disabilities			
Economically Disadvantaged			
Migrant Students			
Homeless Students			
Students from Military Families			

Table 3b. Overall Student Subgroup Participation Rates on State Mathematics Assessments

Subgroup	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)
American Indian or Alaska Native			
Asian			
Black or African American			
Hispanic or Latino			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander			
White			
Multiracial			
English Learners			
Students with Disabilities			
Economically Disadvantaged			
Migrant Students			
Homeless Students			
Students from Military Families			

Table 3c. Overall Student Subgroup Participation Rates on State Science Assessments

Subgroup	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)	(*insert school year*)
American Indian or Alaska Native			
Asian			
Black or African American			
Hispanic or Latino			
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander			
White			
Multiracial			

Subgroup	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)
English Learners			
Students with Disabilities			
Economically Disadvantaged			
Migrant Students			
Homeless Students			
Students from Military Families			

Questions to Consider During Data Analyses

- What do these data tell you about differences in participation rates by subgroups?

- What do these data tell you about differences in participation rates by subgroups in reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and any other content area you choose to investigate?

Step 3: Collect and Analyze District Assessment Participation Data

At the state level, it may be illustrative to examine district-level data to identify districts that may need targeted support for increasing participation in statewide assessments. An action plan can help focus on the districts that have the lowest levels of assessment participation for the previous three school years. Tables 4a and 4b can be used to organize participation data from districts with the lowest participation rates. States may want to add tables for other relevant entities, such as charter schools.

Table 4a. Select District Participation on Statewide General Assessments

	Reading/Language Arts Participation			Math Participation			Science Participation		
	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)	(insert school year)
District 1									
District 2									
District 3									
District 4									
District 5									

Table 4b. Select District Participation on Statewide Alternate Assessments

	Reading/Language Arts Participation			Math Participation			Science Participation		
	(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
District 1									
District 2									
District 3									
District 4									
District 5									

Step 4: Compile State Contextual Information

Collecting contextual information will support developing an action plan that is responsive and appropriate for your state. This section guides the user to consider state policies that oversee decisions to opt students out of testing and other considerations that may impact student assessment participation.

Parent and Student Opt-Out Policies

Some states permit parents to opt students out of state assessments and students to opt out of state assessments, or allow districts to set their own policies allowing voluntary opt outs of assessment participation.

- What are the opt-out policies in your state?

- How many parents/students in your state opted out of statewide assessments?

- For these parents/students, what information do you have on their rationales for opting out?

Use Table 5a to compile data on the percentage of students opted out by parents (i.e., parent refusal) in your state. This percentage is typically calculated as: [(number of students opted out by parents) ÷ (number of students enrolled during the testing window)] x 100. Are there any patterns in the opt-out data?

Table 5a. Percentage of Students Opted out by Parents (Parent Refusal), by Content Area and Grade, in Previous School Years

Grade	Reading/Language Arts			Mathematics			Science		
	(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
Grade 3									
Grade 4									
Grade 5									
Grade 6									
Grade 7									
Grade 8									
High School									

Use Table 5b to compile data on the percentage of students who opted out (i.e., student refusal) in your state. This percentage is typically calculated as: [(number of students opted out) ÷ (number of students enrolled during the testing window)] x 100. Are there any patterns in the opt-out data?

Table 5b. Percentage of Students Who Opted Out (Student Refusal), by Content Area and Grade, in Previous School Years

Grade	Reading/Language Arts			Mathematics			Science		
	(insert school year)	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*	*(insert school year)*
Grade 3									
Grade 4									
Grade 5									
Grade 6									
Grade 7									
Grade 8									
High School									

Significant Medical Emergency Flexibility

On March 29, 2004, the U.S. Department of Education announced a policy that students who were unable to participate in the state assessment during the testing and make-up windows because of a significant medical emergency would not count against the school's participation rate. States decide whether to use this flexibility and what constitutes a significant medical emergency (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

- Does your state have a significant medical emergency policy? If so, what are the stipulations of this policy? Does your medical emergency policy impact your district or state participation rates?

Other Considerations Impacting Student Assessment Participation

- Were students provided the opportunity to participate in statewide assessments using the entire test window?

- Are there virtual schools in your state that require students to participate in statewide assessments at a physical location? Did students participate in assessments at the physical location?

- Were some students who missed the opportunity to participate in a state-required college entrance exam (e.g., SAT, ACT) not allowed to make up the test?

- Are there other state or district contexts and policies that may impact state assessment participation? Examples might include chronic absenteeism, home-schooling, students tested in the wrong grade, or assessment administration technology issues.

Step 5: Identify State Level Challenges to 95 Percent Participation Rate

Considering all the data you have looked at and considering the contexts you have identified, what are your initial thoughts about your main challenges in meeting the 95 percent assessment participation requirement? This will help in targeting the action plan toward your particular contexts. What does the data review highlight about different facets of statewide assessment participation?

- All students or particular subgroups?

- All grades or specific grades?

- All content areas or one or two content areas?

- All districts or certain schools or school levels?

- Is there a discrepancy between the participation rate of students who take the general assessment and the participation rate of students who take the alternate assessment?

- What likely causes of low participation rates has your team identified?

Step 6: Design Action Plan Steps for Implementation and Monitoring

Team members identified to assist with designing the plan are education community members and partners who share insights, contexts, and strategies to increase student assessment participation. They should determine steps/strategies, a timeline, and milestones.

The design team should begin by reviewing participation data. Do the data point to potential causes of low participation? Is more data needed? What are the state's data-based goals for improving participation?

Next, the design team can plan specific implementation and monitoring steps and strategies. They should consider which implementation and monitoring team members are best positioned to assist with each step and strategy, what resources are needed to complete those steps, and the expected timing for beginning and completing the work.

- What are key steps/strategies that will be implemented to improve assessment participation rates? Who will address each step/strategy? What resources will be needed?

- How will your state communicate steps/strategies to member and partner groups (e.g., informational meetings, newsletters, website postings)?

- Which members and partners will implement steps/strategies? Which members and partners will be responsible for ensuring that the steps/strategies are implemented as designed?

Implementation: Steps and Strategies

For each key step/strategy, consider the following (sample steps/strategies are included):

Step/Strategy	Responsible Member(s)	Resources Needed for Step/Strategy
1. State reviews district participation data for statewide assessments	Data analysis team	Staff time
2. State notifies districts if they are below the 95 percent participation rate either overall or for students with disabilities. Let them know they need to develop a plan to increase student assessment participation	Communications team	Email text: Dear Superintendent... "Developing an Assessment Participation Action Plan: A Tool for State Leaders"
3. State checks in with districts on whether they have formed a team and started the analysis process and offer supports	Communications team	Provide supports for data analysis
4. State designates and communicates a deadline for action plans to be delivered to the state	Implementation and communications teams	Staff time
5. District action plans are delivered to the state	Implementation Team	Staff time
6. State reviews district action plans to confirm it addresses the areas that are problematic and offer feedback	Action plan review team	Staff time
7. State and districts monitor implementation of action plans	Monitoring team	Staff time
8. State reviews state assessment participation data	Data analysis team	Staff time
9. State evaluates effectiveness of action plans and takes steps to improve the plans	Evaluation team	Staff time

Step/Strategy	Responsible Member(s)	Resources Needed for Step/Strategy
where needed		

Implementation: Monitoring, Milestones, and Timeline

For each task, consider the following (sample milestones and start/end dates are included):

Task	Milestones	Task Start	Task Complete
1. *State reviews district participation data for statewide assessments*	*Disaggregate spring 2022 participation data by subgroup to establish baseline for students with disabilities*	*When assessment data are released*	*August 31*
2. *State notifies districts if they are below the 95 percent participation rate either overall or for students with disabilities. Let them know they need to develop action plans to increase student assessment participation*	*All districts <95% overall and for students with disabilities notified to develop an action plan*	*September 1*	*September 15*
3. *State checks in with districts on whether they have formed a team and started the analysis process and offer supports*	*All districts <95% overall and for students with disabilities are contacted regarding their progress on action plans and whether they need resources*	*September 30*	*October 10*
4. *State designates and communicates a deadline for action plans to be delivered to the state*	*Communications on action plan deadline go out to all districts <95% overall and for students with disabilities*	*October 11*	*December 17*

Task	Milestones	Task Start	Task Complete
5. District action plans are delivered to the state	Districts upload action plans to state repository	October 11	December 17
6. State reviews district action plans to confirm they address the areas that are problematic and offer feedback	State signs off on all district action plans for <95% overall and for students with disabilities	December 1	January 15
7. State and districts monitor implementation of action plans	All districts <95% overall and for students with disabilities implementing action plans are monitored	January 15	May 30
8. State reviews district assessment participation data	State assessment scored and participation rates analyzed	When data are final	August 31
9. State evaluates effectiveness of action plans and takes steps to Improve the plans if needed	State evaluates plan and makes any needed improvements	May 30	June 30

Step 7: Evaluate the Effectiveness of the Plan

As a last step, the education community members and partners team should evaluate the effectiveness of the action plans and make adjustments in areas where improvement is needed. A team should develop some questions that will provide feedback needed to understand the effectiveness of the plans. Some simple examples of questions might include:

- What did we learn as we implemented the action plan?
- What worked well with our action plan?
- What did not work well with our action plan?
- Did student participation in assessments increase? What influenced this improvement?
- In what content areas, grades, and subgroups did we see the most improvement?
- Did student assessment participation decrease in any content areas, grades, or subgroups? What influenced this regression?
- What do we need to change in next year's action plan?

Summary

This resource is designed for state leaders and staff to use in reviewing assessment participation data, engaging in data analyses, and supporting the design of action plans that address students' assessment participation. After reviewing data and engaging with different stakeholder groups, state leaders and staff will be equipped to support their districts and schools in developing action plans that are reflective of their unique contexts.

Resources

Accrediting Commission for Schools. (n.d.). *Chapter V: Sample excerpts from the schoolwide action plan*. https://www.acswasc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/5-ACS-WASC-Sample-action-plan.pdf

D'Agord, C., Ruggiero, T., Strunk, K., & Thurlow, M. L. (2019). *Data analysis and use planning tool for examining AA-AAAS participation: Addressing the percentage of students participating in the alternate assessment* (NCEO Tool #2). National Center on Educational Outcomes. https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/Tool2DataAnalysisAndUse.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *FS185 - Assessment participation in mathematics file specifications: SY 2022-23*. https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/edfacts/eden/non-xml/fs185-19-1.docx