What Alternate Assessments and Diplomas Really Mean for Students with Significant Disabilities

Martha Thurlow, Sheryl Lazarus, and Chris Rogers
Reauthorization of ESEA in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) included two policy initiatives for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities:

- Limits on participation in the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS)
- The possibility of a state-defined alternate diploma for these students
OVERVIEW

It is now nearly five years since these policies were enacted. This session will:

– Examine the current status of these policies, how they are being implemented, and their effects

– Present findings of analyses of the implementation of these policies

– Discuss benefits and challenges
Prior to ESSA, states were allowed to count 1% of students as proficient using alternate assessments (AA-AAAS); after ESSA, states were allowed to have no more than 1.0% of students participate in AA-AAAS.
ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS (AA-AAAS)
**Purpose of study:** To provide an update on state participation criteria and guidelines for AA-AAAS.

**Method:** In January and February 2019, NCEO staff searched the websites of state education agencies to collect AA-AAAS policy information.
Participation Criteria (top 5 + other)

- Significantly affected cognitive and adaptive function: 50
- Has disability or IEP: 49
- Alternate or modified curriculum standards: 49
- Extensive individualized instruction and/or supports: 49
- Parent informed: 26
- Other: 17

Number of States

Note: N=51 (includes DC)

Factors Not to be Used for Participation Decisions (top 5)

1. Disability label, placement or service: 45
2. Social, cultural, linguistic or environmental factor: 45
3. Excessive absences: 44
4. Poor performance or impact on accountability system: 43
5. Administrator decision: 38

Note: N=46

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Format of Criteria for Participation (top 5)

- Checklist: 40
- Description/text: 40
- Flow chart/decision tree: 25
- Other guide chart or figure: 5
- Training audio/visual, webinar: 4

Note: N=51 (includes DC)

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Definitions of Students with Significant and Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are typically characterized by significantly below average general cognitive functioning. This commonly includes a student with intelligence test scores two or more standard deviations below the mean on a standardized individually administered intelligence test, occurring with commensurate deficits in adaptive behavior that are frequently also evident in early childhood. Further, the cognitive disability must significantly impact the child’s educational performance and ability to generalize learning from one setting to another. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in general, require highly specialized education and/or social, psychological, and medical services to access an educational program. These students may also rely on adults for personal care and have medical conditions that require physical/verbal supports, and assistive technology devices.

These intensive and on-going supports and services are typically provided directly by educators and are delivered across all educational settings.
A student with a significant cognitive disability is one who has records that indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is defined as actions essential for an individual to live independently and to function safely in daily life. Having a significant cognitive disability is not determined by an IQ test score, but rather a holistic understanding of a student.

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Components of State Definitions of Significant Cognitive Disabilities (top 6 + other)

- Significant cognitive deficits: 35
- Poor adaptive skill level: 34
- Pervasive needs across settings or time: 23
- Not solely based on IQ score, holistic: 19
- Extensive, individualized, direct instruction: 16
- Unable to reach grade level standards: 13
- Other: 10

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Parent Information (top 5)

- Student will take alternate assessment: 25
- Mentions alternate standards: 18
- Parent/guardian signature or initials: 17
- Effect on diploma type: 16
- Inform of options if parent/guardian does not agree: 3

Note: N=26

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
Mentions of English Learner or Language in AA- AAAS Criteria (top 6)

- What may interfere in ELs showing abilities (e.g., adaptive tests) - 13 mentions
- EL assessments - 12 mentions
- IQ tests in student's first language - 6 mentions
- Language assessments - 2 mentions
- Alternate ELP assessment as criteria - 2 mentions
- One year EL exemption policy - 2 mentions

Note: N=24

Source: Thurlow, Lazarus, et al. (2019)
STATE-DEFINED ALTERNATE DIPLOMA
Definition of “state-defined alternate diploma” included in Sec. 8101. Definitions

Specifically designated for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities assessed using the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards
The state-defined alternate diploma counts in the ACGR.
Federal Requirements:

✔ Standards based

✔ Aligned with state requirements for the regular high school diploma

✔ Obtained within the time period for which the state ensures the availability of a free appropriate public education (FAPE)

It must meet the implied condition of being state defined!
STATE-DEFINED ALTERNATE DIPLOMA ANALYSIS

- **Purpose of study**: To summarize the status of state-defined alternate diplomas three years after ESSA indicated that states could develop these diplomas and use them in accountability calculations.

- **Method**: From mid-January to mid-February 2019, NCEO staff searched the websites of state education agencies to collect relevant policy information.
STATES

Source: Thurlow, Test, Rogers, Klare & Lazarus (2019)
ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Participate in AA-AAAS: 5
- Meet credit requirements: 4
- Progress on IEP: 1
- Attendance and conduct: 1
- None: 2

Number of States

Source: Thurlow, Test, et al. (2019)
## TOTAL CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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<th>STATES</th>
<th>ALTERNATE</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>16.0 (b)</td>
<td>24.0</td>
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</table>

- **a:** Louisiana had 2 standard diploma options
- **b:** West Virginia’s information was missing credit counts for some content areas.

Source: Thurlow, Test, et al. (2019)
<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
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<td>different</td>
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</table>

a: In Louisiana, the number of credits in science is less than for the university diploma, but the same as for the career diploma.

Source: Thurlow, Test, et al. (2019)
## TYPE OF RESOURCES AVAILABLE

<table>
<thead>
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<th>STATES</th>
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Requirement resources and Implementation resources.

Source: Thurlow, Test, et al. (2019)
• **2018-19 participation guidelines and definitions for alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards (NCEO Report 415)** (2019, October)

• **Status of state-defined alternate diplomas in 2018-19 (NCEO Report 416)** (2019, September)

• **2016-2017 APR snapshot #21: AA-AAS participation and performance** (2019, July)
REFERENCES (continued)

- Alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities: Participation guidelines and definitions (NCEO Report 406) (2017, December)
- Considerations for developing state-defined alternate diplomas for students with significant cognitive disabilities (2016, November; updated 2017, March)
Discussion

- What are the benefits and challenges . . .
  - 1% threshold on participation in the AA-AAAS

- What are the benefits and challenges . . .
  - State-defined alternate alternate diplomas
FOR MORE INFORMATION

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