

Alternate Assessment (including NYSAA) *Frequently Asked Questions*

This FAQ provides information and policy implementation guidance to administrators, teachers and district or school-level Committees on Special Education (CSE)¹ on New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA), including eligibility determinations. For additional information about NYSAA administration procedures, please see [NYC DOE Assessment Memorandum #3](#) and the [New York State Education Department \(NYSED\) NYSAA guidance](#).² School staff should carefully consider individual student contexts in determining how to apply this guidance, and consult with their building school psychologists or contact their district Supervisor of School Psychologists for support.

Students eligible for NYSAA must be assessed on the grade-appropriate content that is consistent with the student's chronological age. These assessments are not achievement tests; rather, they measure students' abilities by collecting both baseline and final data points.

QUICK LINKS

- [Overview](#)
- [Eligibility](#)
- [Implementation](#)

OVERVIEW

1. What are alternate assessments?

Alternate assessments are used to evaluate the performance of students with severe cognitive disabilities who are unable to participate in general education assessments, even with testing accommodations. These measures of achievement provide eligible students with an alternative way to access assessments, measure progress, and support teachers in improving instructional strategies for these students.

2. What is New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA)?

The New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA) is a datafolio assessment in which students with severe cognitive disabilities demonstrate achievement of learning standards through alternate performance level indicators. Students are assessed according to their chronological age, which align to predetermined grade levels set by NYSED.³

In New York State, NYSAA will align to the new Common Core Learning Standards beginning in the 2013-14 academic year for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. The goal of NYSAA is to ensure that students with severe cognitive disabilities can complete these tasks independently and accurately.

¹ Note: school-level CSEs are also known as IEP Teams.

² NYC DOE Assessment Memorandum #3 (<http://intranet.nycboe.net/Accountability/Assessment/YearlyTesting/default.htm>) and NYSED guidance (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/nysaa-manual-14.html>)

³ A table of chronological ages and corresponding grade levels and NYSAA forms may be found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/2013-14/agerange-14.pdf>

Alternate Assessment (including NYSAA) *Frequently Asked Questions*

3. What does “students with severe cognitive disabilities” mean?

NYSED defines “students with severe disabilities” as students who have limited cognitive abilities combined with behavioral and/or physical limitations and who require highly specialized education and/or social, psychological, and medical services in order to maximize their full potential for useful and meaningful participation in society and for self-fulfillment.⁴ Students with severe disabilities may experience severe speech, language, and/or perceptual-cognitive impairments and challenging behaviors that interfere with learning and socialization opportunities. These students may also have extremely fragile physiological conditions and may require personal care, physical/verbal supports, and assistive technology devices.

Students with severe cognitive disabilities often present with significantly below average intelligence and deficits in adaptive behavior. These students typically benefit from highly specialized education programs and/or social, psychological, and medical services in order to maximize their full potential.⁵ Decisions about the nature and scope of special education and related services are made by the CSE and are based on individual student needs.

4. What is a “highly specialized educational program?”

The level of service and complexity of academic standards is determined based on individual students’ functioning, and as such will vary across students. The instruction is designed to ensure access to the general education program—including grade level common core learning standards—and also address the unique needs of the student with a severe cognitive disability. Typically, students who participate in alternate assessment (such as NYSAA) are expected to achieve alternate standards, which may be reduced in scope and complexity and are more closely focused on supporting post-secondary transition (e.g. life and vocational skills). Highly specialized educational programs help facilitate the acquisition, application, and transfer of skills across different settings (e.g. at home, in school, in their communities and/or workplace).

5. Which program options are available for students who participate in NYSAA?

There are many program options for students with disabilities in New York City public schools, including students who are approved to participate in alternate assessments, such as NYSAA. These options include attending community schools and receiving special education instructional supports (e.g. SETSS, ICT, self-contained classes) alongside their nondisabled peers and District75 citywide programs for students with severe cognitive disabilities. There is no one set program model (e.g. 12:1+1), and the fact that a student participates in one such model cannot be used as criteria to determine eligibility for participation in NYSAA. See [question 7](#) to for information on identifying students who are eligible for participation in NYSAA.

ELIGIBILITY

6. What is the range of NYS assessment options available for students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities may participate in a variety of assessment programs, depending on their needs and as specified on their IEPs. In New York City, the CSE (including school-based CSEs or IEP teams) determine whether students will participate in:

⁴ <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/nysaa-eligibility.pdf>

⁵ Please see the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for definitions of various disabilities:

<http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/.root,regs,300,A,300%252E8>, and NYSED’s NYSAA Eligibility and Participation Criteria: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/nysaa-eligibility.pdf> and <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/>

Alternate Assessment (including NYSAA) Frequently Asked Questions

- NYSED’s general assessment program with or without accommodations;⁶
- NYS Alternate Assessment with or without accommodations; or
- A combination of NYSED’s general assessment for some content areas and NYSAA for other content areas (e.g. NYS Common Core assessment in Math, and NYSAA for ELA).

7. Which students are eligible to participate in NYSAA?

Eligibility for participation in NYSAA is determined by the CSE on an individual basis.⁷ Only students with severe cognitive disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are eligible to be considered for participation in NYSAA and each individual student must meet all of the following criteria:

- Has significant deficits in communication/language and in adaptive behavior; and,
- Requires a highly specialized educational program that facilitates the acquisition, application, and transfer of skills across natural environments (home, school, community, and/or workplace); and,
- Requires educational support systems, such as assistive technology, personal care services, health/medical services, or behavioral intervention.

8. What are the criteria for determining whether students have “severe cognitive disabilities?”

During the special education referral and evaluation process, a student’s intellectual functioning- the ability to learn, think, problem-solve and rationalize- is measured using a comprehensive battery of reliable and valid assessments, also known as IQ tests.⁸ In addition, adaptive behavior skills are assessed to gain an understanding of the impact on educational performance and whether s/he has the skills needed to live independently.⁹ A student may be found to have a severe cognitive disability when both their intellectual functioning and their adaptive behavior skills are significantly limited.

Due to the diverse student population in New York City, it is especially important that the staff involved in determining whether a student has a severe cognitive disability also consider the student’s community and environment, linguistic diversity, and cultural factors.

9. Are there any disabilities that automatically qualify a student to participate in NYSAA?¹⁰

No. The CSE must ensure that decisions about whether a student participates in NYSAA are not based on a student’s category of disability (e.g. it is not appropriate to institute a policy wherein all students with autism are automatically designated for participation in NYSAA), language differences (e.g. ELL status), excessive or extended absences, or cultural/environmental factors.

⁶ For additional information on testing accommodations please refer to: http://intranet.nycboe.net/NR/rdonlyres/E585F7FF-1FE9-4496-9BA9-0C4576E4D46F/0/TestingaccommodationsFAQ_FINAL.pdf

⁷ Note: throughout this document, “Committees on Special Education (CSE)” refers to district-level CSEs and school-based CSEs, formerly known as IEP Teams.

⁸ The most commonly used IQ tests used in schools are the Wechsler Scale for Children (WISC) and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, which are reliable and valid measures of intellectual functioning in children.

⁹ Schools use reliable and valid measures of adaptive behavior (such as the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales) to assess students’ abilities in these areas.

¹⁰ Note: according to IDEA, the definition of “learning disabled” excludes students with intellectual disabilities, thereby making students who are identified with learning disabilities ineligible to participate in NYSAA (<http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/root,dynamic,TopicalBrief,23>.)

Alternate Assessment (including NYSAA) *Frequently Asked Questions*

10. Which supports are available to schools for determining NYSAA eligibility?

At the school level, school psychologists, as well as the CSE, play an important role in determining if a student with a severe cognitive disability may be eligible for participation in NYSAA. In addition, the CSE must consider whether the student requires substantial modifications to the core curriculum and is unable to meet the performance level of the statewide assessments, even with modifications and accommodations.

Note: the decision to approve a student for participation in NYSAA is not based on the amount of time the student receives special education services.

11. How are parents/guardians informed of NYSAA eligibility and evaluation policies and processes?

Parents/ guardians are encouraged to participate in their child's eligibility determination of alternate assessment/NYSAA during a CSE meeting. Alternate assessment, including NYSAA, is among the most restrictive recommendations that a CSE can implement for students and there are implications for student promotion, diploma options, and post-secondary opportunities. The CSE must implement the most rigorous programs appropriate for students with disabilities.

The CSE ensures that parents have a clear understanding of how an alternate assessment/NYSAA recommendation may impact their children's academic experience while in school, as well as their diploma and post-secondary options. It is important to explicitly advise parents that high school students who participate in NYSAA will not be on track to receive local or Regents diplomas. Instead, students who participate in NYSAA may receive the [Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential](#), a non-diploma credential that recognizes the attainment of foundational skills needed for post-school living, learning and working.

For information on student promotion and high school accountability for students participating in alternate assessment/NYSAA, please refer to [Chancellor's Regulation A-501](#) and the [Graduation Cohort Policy FAQ](#).¹¹

IMPLEMENTATION

12. Where is information about alternate assessment participation documented in student records?

Students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), captured in the Special Education Student Information System (SEIS), indicate whether a student with a disability will participate in alternate assessments, including NYSAA. There is a checkbox in SEIS in the "Participation in State and District-Wide Assessments" section of the IEP where schools indicate whether students will "participate in alternate assessment for State and/or district-wide assessments of student achievement." In addition, the student's IEP must clearly state the rationale for why the student cannot participate in general assessment programs and was determined to be eligible.

13. Which supports are available to schools for NYSAA administration?

¹¹ Chancellor's Regulation A-501: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/DB08E4BD-DE50-4D96-87FF-9260B3C1AB4D/0/A501.pdf> and Graduation Cohort Policy FAQ: <http://intranet.nycboe.net/NR/ronlyres/4241A626-2F6D-4A87-B864-99CA718F18CB/0/Acpolicycohortpolicy.pdf>

Alternate Assessment (including NYSAA) Frequently Asked Questions

The DOE provides training to staff involved with students who participate in NYSAA either through a one-day session with Measured Progress (the NYSAA vendor) or on additional DOE-sponsored NYSAA administration trainings with schools. NYSAA Liaisons also provide turnkey professional development directly to schools.

The DOE also reviews samples of students' NYSAA datafolios yearly to provide feedback on scoring and administration procedures to schools and teachers. Schools bring these student samples to DOE-sponsored collegial reviews. At least one collegial review is conducted for each datafolio to determine any errors, omissions, or need for revisions. Please refer to the DOE's [Assessment Memorandum #3](#) for additional information on NYSAA collegial reviews. Schools may consult with their Network NYSAA Team Members for additional information on NYSAA administration support.¹²

14. How will NYSAA align to Common Core Learning Standards?

New York State Alternate Assessment (NYSAA) will be aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics for Grades 3-8 and high school beginning with the 2013-14 school year. According to NYSED, the new NYSAA design still uses assessment tasks that are intended to measure students' achievement of learning standards through alternate performance indicators. However, for 2013-14, the academic content used to construct the NYSAA will now be derived from the Common Core Learning Standards. Student datafolios will include evidence for five (5) Extensions per content area in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics.

Other content and procedural changes to NYSAA can be found in NYSED's "[Transition of the New York State Alternate Assessment \(NYSAA\) to Measure the P-12 Common Core Learning Standards \(CCLS\)](#)" memorandum, released in July 2013.¹³ NYSED also plans to begin training Alternate Assessment Training Network Specialists and Regional Lead Trainers throughout New York State in the fall.

15. How frequently should a student's eligibility for alternate assessment/NYSAA be reviewed?

At each annual IEP meeting, it is essential that the CSE discusses and reviews a student's entire IEP, including the section on testing. For students participating in NYSAA, the CSE reviews the "Participation in State and District-Wide Assessments" section. Reviewing the most recent evaluations, current data, present levels of performance, instructional supports and related services, and progress towards annual goals, the CSE should determine if alternate assessment/NYSAA continues to be the most appropriate measure of the student's achievement of grade level learning standards.

¹² NYSAA Team Members may be found in Assessment Memorandum #3:

<http://intranet.nycboe.net/Accountability/Assessment/YearlyTesting/default.htm>

¹³ The NYSAA CCLS transition memo from NYSED may be found at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/nysaa/2013-14/transitiontocommoncore.pdf>