

10 Questions Parents Should Ask About Alternate Assessments

CLAUDIA FLOWERS AND DIANE BROWDER
 CHARLOTTE ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROJECT

10 QUESTIONS:

- 1 **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT?**
- 2 **WHAT TOPICS ARE COVERED?**
- 3 **WHAT ACCOMMODATIONS ARE AVAILABLE?**
- 4 **HOW SHOULD MY CHILD PREPARE FOR THE ASSESSMENT?**
- 5 **HOW IS THE ASSESSMENT SCORED?**
- 6 **WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF MY STUDENT DOING WELL OR POORLY?**
- 7 **WHAT IS BEING DONE TO ENSURE THAT THE ASSESSMENT IS FAIR FOR MY CHILD?**
- 8 **CAN I PREVIEW THE ASSESSMENT?**
- 9 **WHO HAS ACCESS TO MY CHILD'S SCORES?**
- 10 **HOW CAN I USE THE SCORES TO HELP MY CHILD?**

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

The 1997 amendments to the *Individuals with Disability Education Act* (IDEA) mandated that all students would be included in statewide testing programs. The recently passed legislation, *No Child Left Behind*, states that ALL students in a school will meet state expectations for reading, math, and science within 12 years. This includes students with low incidence or more severe disabilities. To include students with disabilities who are unable to participate in statewide testing, even with accommodations, states have developed a new option called "alternate assessment" to determine how these students progress on state standards

Although alternate assessment has the potential to highlight the educational needs of students with significant disabilities, there is great variation between states. What gets tested typically becomes the focus for instruction in the classroom as teachers and schools strive to meet state expectations for mandated assessments. While there is not one superior method of implementing alternate assessments, there are certain characteristics of good assessment systems.

Using questions suggested by John Fremer for general education, we suggest 10 questions that all parents should ask

about alternate assessments to understand how a specific state or district's policies impact their child's program.

This publication was funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education OSEP Grant #H324C010040.

For more information, go to the following website:

<http://www.uncc.edu/aap/>

10 QUESTIONS

- 1) *What is the purpose of the assessment?* The most obvious purpose of the assessment is to measure your child's skill level, but the information should be used to enhance your child's educational opportunities and extend your child's learning.
- 2) *What topics does the test*

cover? *No Child Left Behind* requires schools to measure all students' progress in reading/ language arts, math, and science, and the Amendments to IDEA requires that states provide access to the general curriculum. This does not mean school programs need to abandon the focus they have had on

functional skills or providing for other unique, individual needs in the IEP. The requirement does mean that many educators for the first time are having to determine meaningful ways to teach and assess academic skills to students with significant disabilities.



10 QUESTIONS

3) *What accommodations are available?* In recent years, educators have been giving substantial attention to developing valid accommodations for students with disabilities who require their use. Because alternate assessments have been specifically developed for students with significant disabilities, accommodations are not usually a concern.

4) *How should my child prepare for the assessment?* A strong predictor of student success in school is parental involvement. Providing practice outside of school allows more generalization of skills learned across environments and also communicates the importance of the educational process to the student. Because skills on the alternate assessment often are linked to real life applications, providing experiences at home and in the community can be essential to mastering these skills.

5) *How is the assessment scored?* Generally alternate assessments are scored using rubrics, typically on a 4-point scale. Scores of 1 or 2 indicate that the child does not understand or demonstrate the skill being assessed, and 3 or 4 indicates mastery of the knowledge/skill being assessed. Alternate assessments could also measure multiple skills and

scores could be averaged across skills or reported separately for all skills. Sometimes states assign all students taking the alternate assessment to the lowest score if they are not on grade level. In contrast, other states make it possible for students with the most significant disabilities to score at the highest level since their alternate assessments are based on skills selected for the individual student to demonstrate mastery of state standards (e.g., Kentucky, North Carolina).

6) *What is the effect of my student doing well or poorly?* Parents should ask what recognition is provided if their child performs well on the alternate assessment. Conversely, parents need to know remediation or support is provided if their child does not perform well on the assessment. Since the IEP is the legal document that guarantees educational services, parents should ask how their child's performance affects the IEP. In addition, parents need to know if their child has multiple opportunities to take the assessment. In some states, alternate assessments are based on performance data taken across the school year. In others, it is a one time assessment based on a checklist or performance test. Most scores will not inform parents

and teachers *why* the child was not successful. If your child does not perform well on the alternate assessment, parents need to know what follow-up procedures are available for understanding why their child is not achieving.

7) *What is being done to ensure that the assessment is fair for my child?* Schools should provide evidence of how they evaluated the fairness of the exam, and what safeguards are available to ensure that children with disabilities are being treated fairly. Some issues to consider in fairness are whether the skills chosen for assessment are possible given the students sensory of physical challenges and whether an alternative can be used. For example, if an assessment item is related to the mechanics of writing, this could put a student with physical or visual limitations at a disadvantage. It would be unfair to physically guide the student to perform the writing task and score him or her low because guidance was needed.

8) *Can I preview the assessment?* Not all states will allow parents to examine the actual assessment, but samples should be available for parents to view. Previewing the assessment allows parents to examine the content,

which typically indicates what the teacher is focusing on in the class.

9) *Who has access to my child's scores?* The 1974 Family Education Rights and Privacy Act gives parents the right to inspect and review their child's educational record, and mandates that access to their child's records be limited to certain school officials. States do publicly report alternate assessment scores to comply with recent federal legislation like *No Child Left Behind*, but these are data compiled across students to protect individual student confidentiality.

10) *How can I use the scores to help my child?* The use of assessment in the schools should focus on the student and ways of helping the student. Merely measuring your child's learning does not ensure that your child will learn. It is teaching, not testing, that produces learning. Using scores from the assessment should guide in developing plans to help your child continue to grow and develop. Ask the teaching team what these scores mean to them and how they will be used in planning your child's educational program in the year to come.