

Learning Opportunities for Your Child
Through Alternate Assessments

ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS

**Based on Modified Academic
Achievement Standards**



NATIONAL
CENTER ON
EDUCATIONAL
OUTCOMES

In collaboration with:

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)

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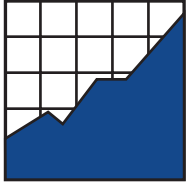
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Deb Tanner, publication design

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**NATIONAL
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This document is available online at www.nceo.info/OnlinePubs/AAMASParentGuide.pdf

This document is available in alternative formats upon request.

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“Accelerated growth toward, and mastery of State-approved grade-level standards are goals of special education.”

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 71 Federal Register, Pg. 46,653

Introduction

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provide powerful ways to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. NCLB has increased the attention paid to all students, including students who receive special education. IDEA, updated in 2004 to align with NCLB, provides a new and improved focus on providing special education students with the same high expectations and learning opportunities provided to all students.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that all public school students participate in statewide assessments. These assessments, given annually in certain grades and subjects (see box), are used to measure student progress and to hold schools, school districts, and states accountable for improving the education of America's public school children, with a focus on the nation's poor and disadvantaged students. NCLB requires all states to bring all students to a proficient level in reading and math by 2014.

For students with disabilities who need additional services and supports, there is also IDEA. It requires schools, school districts, and states to provide the special education services and supports these students need to benefit from their educational program, just as all other students.

NCLB Testing Requirements

All students in grades 3 through 8 must be tested each year in both reading/language arts and math. In addition, high school students must be tested once sometime during grades 10-12 in both reading/language arts and math.

Note: Beginning in 2008, all students must also be assessed in science once during grades 3-5, once during grades 6-9, and once during grades 10-12. However, schools are not held accountable for student performance on these science assessments.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you understand an assessment option that can be made available to certain students who receive special education. This option is called an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS)**. You will learn how this option can work to improve your child's academic performance and ensure that the school and school district provide services and supports to improve your child's performance. Understanding this assessment option will help you advocate for your special education student in the very best way possible.

At the end of this booklet you will find some additional sources of information that you can use so that your child benefits from the school accountability provisions of NCLB while also making the most of the individualized services and supports required by IDEA.

BIG IDEAS

- 1** Improving Academic Achievement Through School Accountability
- 2** Creating Flexible Assessment Options for Special Education Students
- 3** Understanding Modified Academic Achievement Standards
- 4** Making Evidence-based Decisions for Your Child
- 5** Linking Instruction and Assessment to State Academic Content Standards

Terms to Know

Academic Achievement Standards

Academic achievement standards spell out how well students need to know the *academic content standards*. Each state's achievement standards must provide at least three levels of achievement: advanced, proficient and basic. Many states have more than three levels and may use different names for the levels. Each state determines its own academic achievement standards.

Academic Content Standards

Every state is required to have challenging academic content standards in reading/ language arts, math, and science. Each state's academic content standards contain what students need to know. Many states have content standards in other academic areas as well. These standards must be the same for all schools and all students.

Achievement Data by Subgroup

Achievement data by subgroup is student performance results disaggregated, or broken out, by important student groups, such as students from major racial/ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficiency and those with disabilities. The NCLB requirement for disaggregated data is designed to help school districts and schools close the achievement gap between subgroups of children who historically underachieve and their better performing peers.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Adequate Yearly Progress is the annual improvement that school districts and schools must make each year in order to reach the NCLB goal of having every student proficient by the year 2014. The AYP requirement holds schools accountable for continuous progress in student achievement. In order to make AYP, schools must also test at least 95 percent of their students in each of the subgroups.

Annual Statewide Academic Assessment

Another word for student "testing," annual statewide academic assessments are used to measure student performance and progress. All annual assessments must be aligned with your state's challenging *academic content standards* and challenging *academic achievement standards*.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised according to the requirements of IDEA.

Big Idea

1

Improving Academic Achievement Through School Accountability

Sometimes parents of students who receive special education might feel that participating in state assessments isn't appropriate for their child. After all, these students are receiving specialized instruction outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as required by IDEA. Parents may feel that the services and information contained in their child's IEP are sufficient. Student IEPs are used to outline the particular strengths and challenges of the student — often in the area of academics like reading, writing, and math — but sometimes in non-academic areas like behavior. Annual goals designed to improve achievement and performance in the student's areas of weakness are laid out, along with the particular services and supports that will be provided. Since the IEP is a profile of the student's needs that arise from his or her disability and a statement of the resources the school will supply in order to move the student along in his or her education, some parents may ask why participating in state assessments is necessary.

Participating in the state's annual assessments in reading, math, and science provides evidence of how the school is doing in educating your child. Results from these assessments are provided to you so that you can understand just how your child is performing compared to other students in the same grade. These results can be vital in helping to determine if your child is making enough academic progress to become proficient at grade level. Results can be used to develop your child's IEP and set annual goals that will help your child catch up.

But your child's performance on state assessments plays another very important role. These results, compiled at many levels and for many subgroups of students, are used to determine if your child's school is educating all students in the school at a level that meets the state's expectations. These determinations — known as Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP — serve as the means to hold all schools accountable for educating all students, including special education students.

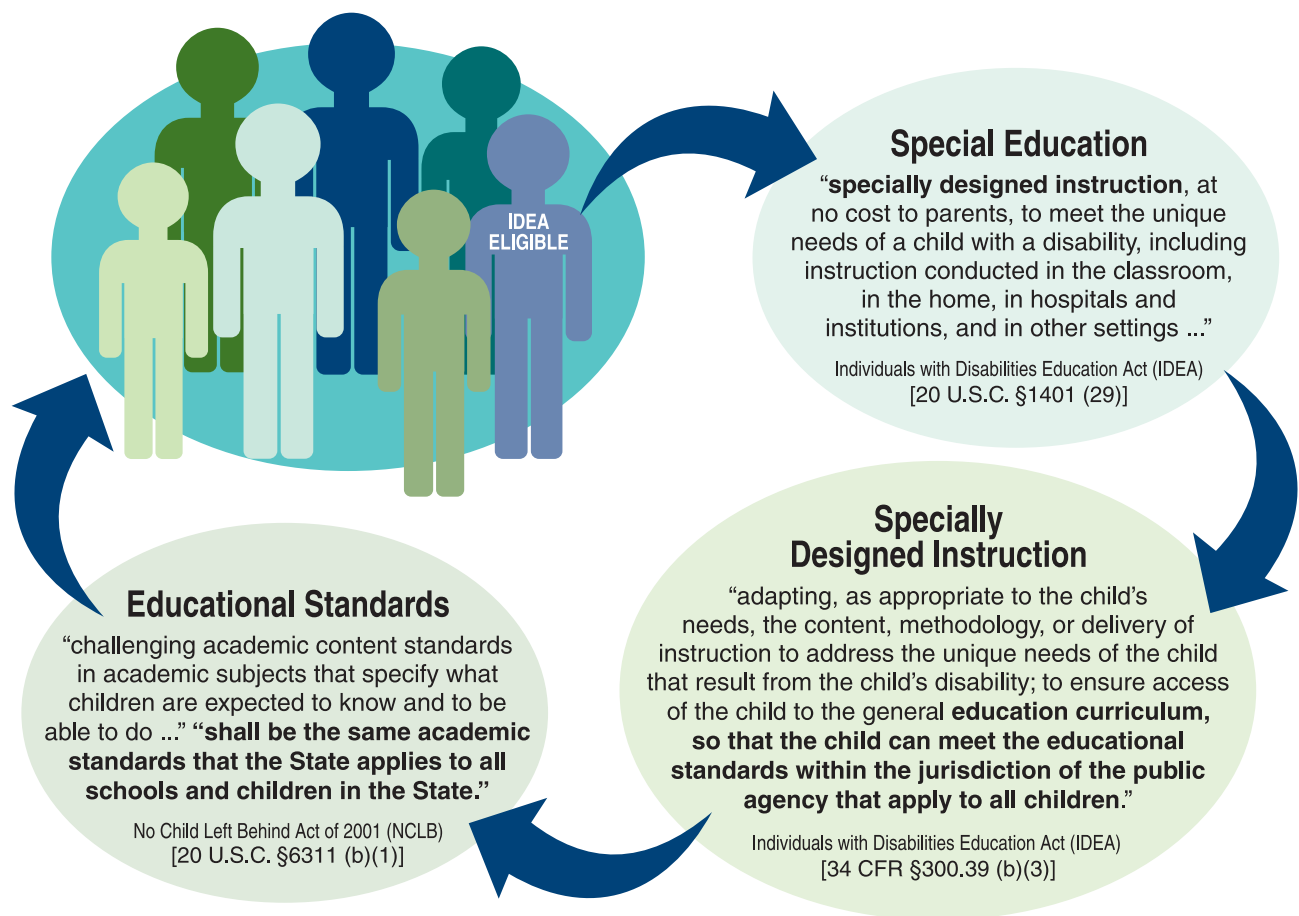
So, having all students participate in state assessments required by NCLB is critical for

- Determining if your child’s special education services and supports are providing real benefit
- Determining if your child’s school is appropriately educating all students

IDEA supports the inclusion of students in NCLB assessments because if some students were to be exempted from state assessments

— allowed not to participate for reasons such as their special education status — then the performance of those students would become less important to schools and the information about their performance would become less meaningful to their parents.

Special education services and supports should enable a student to become proficient — in other words, perform at grade level expectations — on your state’s academic content standards. This is the expectation for all students.



Big Idea

2

Creating Flexible Assessment Options for Special Education Students

The U.S. Department of Education has recognized that students who receive special education have a wide range of abilities. Most are expected to participate in the same regular assessment taken by all students, possibly with the addition of appropriate accommodations. For some students, acquiring the same academic knowledge and mastering the same skills as all other students may proceed more slowly and require more intensive instruction. Yet these students need to participate in all state assessments to maintain school accountability. To allow for full participation, the U.S. Department of Education has developed guidelines for states that permit alternate assessments for special education students. Allowing states to create these flexible assessment options is designed to provide a range of ways special education students can be assessed as required by NCLB.

One such alternate assessment is called an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS)**. This type of alternate assessment — which states can choose to develop and make available to certain special education

students — can provide the opportunity for students to be assessed on the same grade-level academic content standards as all other students, with modifications to the expectations for mastery of the content. Although different from the regular assessment, an AA-MAS still provides information about how your child is performing relative to the grade-level academic content standards for your child's enrolled grade. The results also help teachers provide appropriate instruction, including special education.

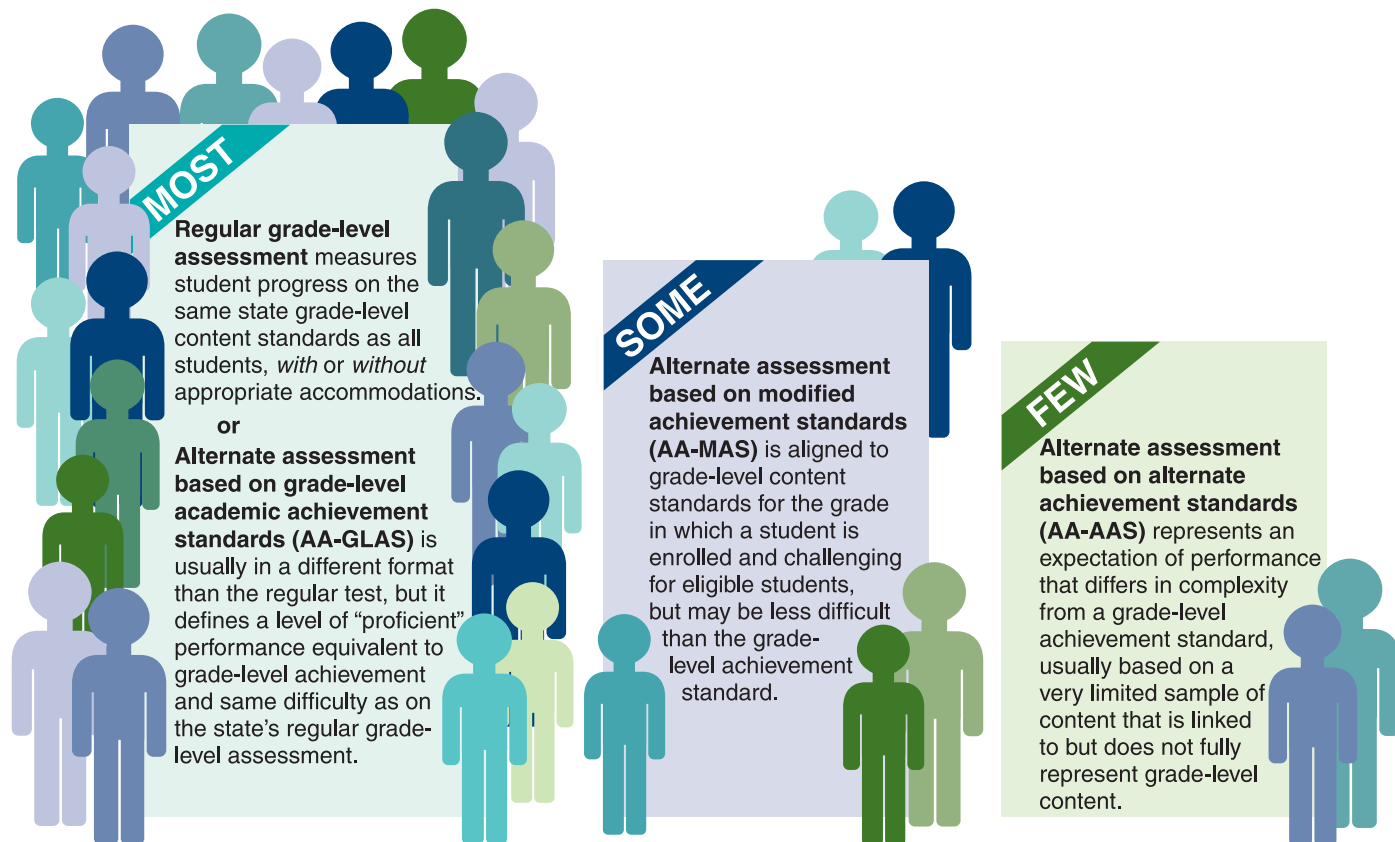
Another assessment option allowed under NCLB — an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) — is designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and, therefore, will be appropriate for only a small group of students with disabilities. For some students, taking the regular grade-level assessment for their enrolled grade level may be too difficult and the results would not provide helpful information to parents and teachers, yet taking an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards is not an appropriate measure of their academic ability.

By allowing states to develop an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement** standards, the U.S. Department of Education has expanded the options available to students and the IEP teams.

The decision about how your child participates in the state assessments required by NCLB is made by your child’s IEP team, which includes you and also your child, when appropriate. Deciding how special education students will participate in state assessments is something every IEP team must do on a yearly basis. If the IEP team decides that your child will not take the regular assessment, the IEP must include

a statement explaining why your child can’t participate in the regular assessment. Further, the IEP team must describe the particular alternate assessment that will be used. The IEP team looks at a variety of information and evidence to make this decision.

Moving students along in their learning — and keeping expectations high — remains the primary objective for all students, including those who participate in state assessments by way of an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards**. Accelerating learning to overcome achievement gaps should be the focus of the special education services and supports delivered to these students. Next you will learn more about this specific alternate assessment option.

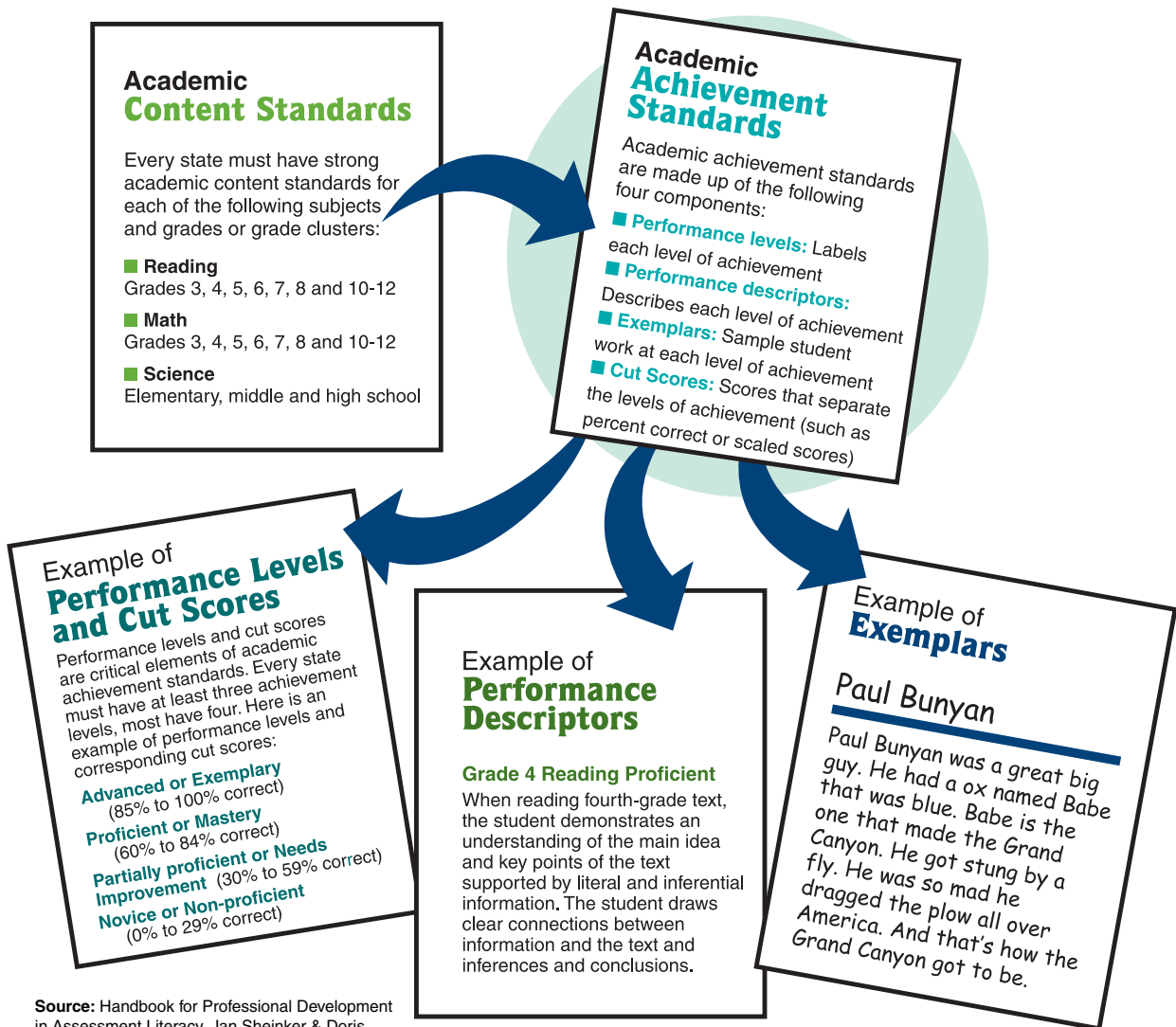


Big Idea 3

Understanding Modified Academic Achievement Standards

Academic achievement standards are not the same as **academic content standards**. Each state's academic content standards

contain what students need to know. Every state is required to have challenging academic content standards in reading/language arts,



Source: Handbook for Professional Development in Assessment Literacy, Jan Sheinker & Doris Redfield (CD-ROM) (2001) CCSSO CAS-SCASS.

math, and science. Many states have content standards in other academic areas as well. NCLB requires these standards to be the same for all schools and all students in the state.

Academic achievement standards spell out how well students need to know the **academic content standards**. NCLB requires that each state's achievement standards provide at least three levels of achievement: advanced, proficient, and basic. Many states have more than three levels and may use different names for the levels. Your state should provide clear definitions for the achievement levels being used for its achievement standards.

Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS) also must have at least three achievement levels. If a state has more than three achievement levels for the regular assessment, it is not required to have the same number of achievement levels for alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards. And, while states are required to have regular assessments for every grade in grades 3 through 8 in reading/language arts, math, and science, and a high school assessment in reading/language arts, math, and science given sometime during grades 10-12, they are not required to have alternate assessments on modified academic achievement standards in all of these grades.

Modified academic achievement standards are based on the same academic content standards as the state's regular academic achievement standards. Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards must cover the same grade-level content as the regular assessments. And, if a student earns a "proficient" score on an AA-MAS, that score must represent understanding of grade-level content.

However, the **modified academic achievement standards** on which this type of alternate assessment is based may be less difficult. States can modify their academic achievement standards in a number of ways, and they can design a totally different assessment as the AA-MAS or adapt the existing regular assessments to use as an AA-MAS.

Here are ways some states have adapted the regular assessment¹:

- **Reduce the total number of test questions.** For example, if the regular reading assessment for Grade 4 has 60 questions, the AA-MAS may have 40 questions. The questions that are eliminated might be the more difficult questions on the regular assessment. However, the questions must still cover the same grade level content as the regular assessment.
- **Simplifying the language of test questions.** For example, while the content being measured is retained, the reading level

¹States have to go through a peer review process to judge the technical adequacy. To date, no states have completed the review process for the AA-MAS.

of the question might be lowered to make the question easier for some students to understand.

- Eliminate an item from multiple-choice questions. For example, if questions have 4 answers to choose from, the list of choices might be reduced to 3.
- Use pictures to aid understanding. For example, adding a picture to a word math problem may enhance the student's understanding.
- Provide more white space on the test. For example, questions are spread out over more pages in the test booklet, providing more white space on each page. This can eliminate distractions and help a student focus on each question.

As discussed in Big Idea 2, the decision that a student will take an AA-MAS rather than the regular assessment is made by the student's IEP team. Your child might participate in an AA-MAS in only one academic content area — such as reading — while participating in the regular assessment, possibly with accommodations, for another content area — such as math. And, students might participate in an AA-MAS in one year and then move to the regular assessment in the same content area the following year. The decision to participate using this type of alternate assessment is not a permanent decision — it must be reviewed annually by the IEP team. The IEP team must consider a variety of information when making this important decision each year.

What an AA-MAS is Not

States are not allowed to create an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards** by:

- **Lowering the “cut score” used to determine the performance level.** For example, if the “cut score” (the percent of questions the student must get correct) for “proficient” on the regular assessment is 75 percent, the state cannot lower the “cut score” to 50 percent on the same assessment and call it an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards.
- **Giving a student an assessment for a lower grade.** Using a test designed for students in a lower grade — regularly called “out-of-level” testing — would not measure the student's mastery of grade-level content, even at a less difficult level. See box on next page for more information about “out-of-level” testing.

Big Idea 4

Making Evidence-based Decisions for Your Child

A number of safeguards are part of the requirements for **alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS)**. These safeguards are designed to make sure the students who participate in state assessments in this manner are:

- Receiving instruction in the general education curriculum for their enrolled grade level
- Being taught by teachers who are qualified and knowledgeable about the academic content standards for their enrolled grade level
- Have annual goals in their IEPs that reflect grade-level academic content standards (More about this in Big Idea 5)

Since an AA-MAS is based on the same academic content standards as the regular assessment for the student's enrolled grade, if your child has not been receiving grade-level instruction, your child will most likely perform poorly on this alternate assessment, just as on the regular state assessment.

An AA-MAS is Not an “Out-of-Level” Test

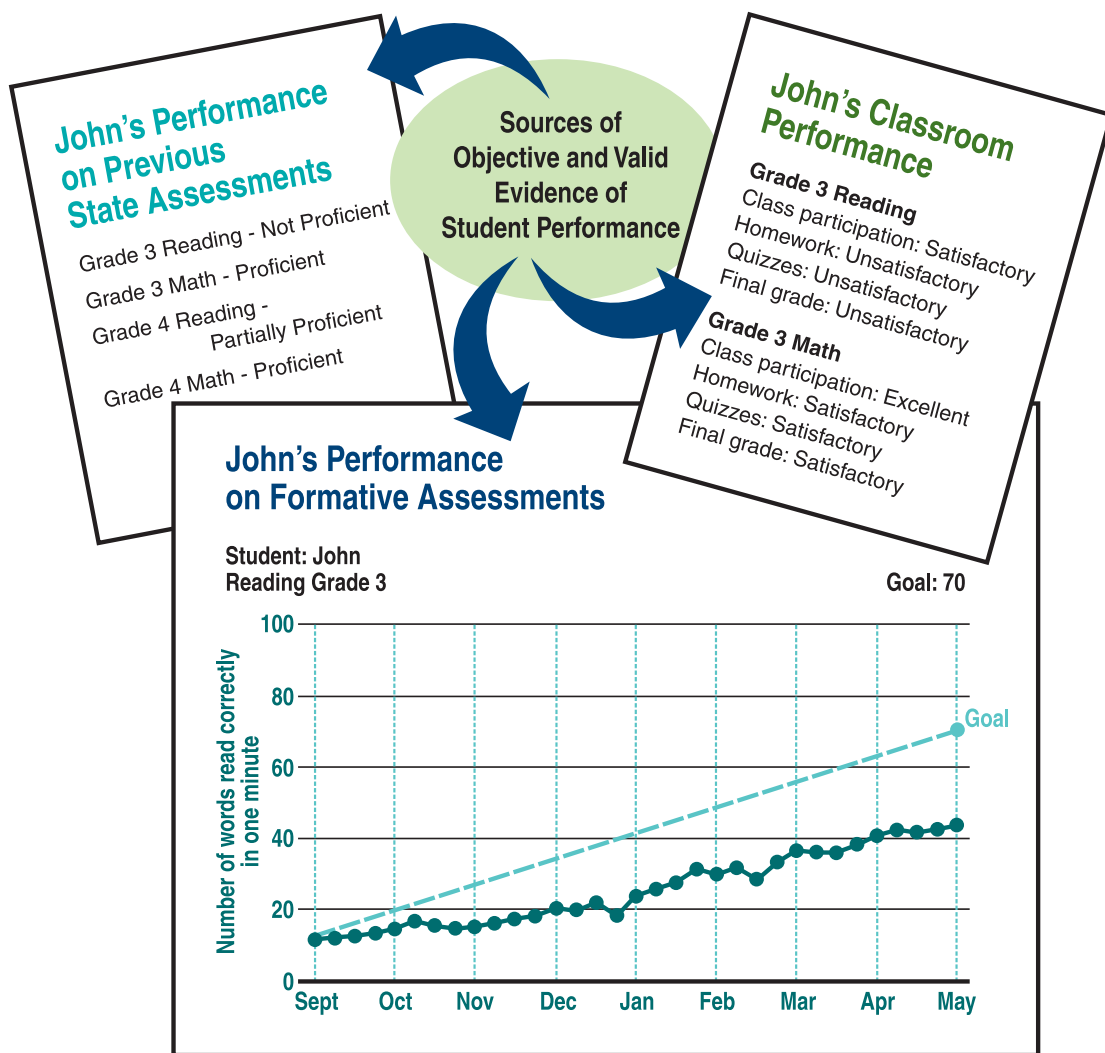
Out-of-level testing generally refers to the practice of giving a student a test intended for students at a lower grade. For example, a 5th grade student who is reading at the 3rd grade level might be inappropriately given the reading assessment designed for all 3rd grade students. Out-of-level testing for special education students was a widespread practice before NCLB, despite research showing that out-of-level testing is often associated with lower expectations. Its use may limit student opportunities for advancing from grade to grade or graduating with a regular high school diploma. Because out-of-level testing is not measuring a student's proficiency on standards for the student's enrolled grade level, its use has been severely limited by federal regulations governing NCLB.

There are many types of information the IEP team should consider when making the decision about whether a student will participate in the regular state assessment for the student's enrolled grade level or take some type of alternate assessment. Since the IEP team is required to explain the reasons for its decision, using a variety of information is an important part of the decision-making process.

Whatever the information, it must be objective and valid. In other words, the information should not be just information

provided by a teacher, teacher aide, or other instructional personnel. Such information is not entirely objective, because it will be somewhat influenced by the opinions of those providing it. Information based on objective measures such as formative assessment provide a variety of objective information about your child's performance throughout the school year. Formative assessments measure a student's progress frequently, such as monthly, and track the progress against a goal.

Examples of the types of information your IEP team might consider are shown below.



Some types of information that are **not** appropriate to use in making the decision about how your child will participate in the state assessment include:

- Your child's particular disability or disabilities
- Your child's placement, such as the general education classroom or a separate special education classroom
- The amount of time your child spends receiving special education
- Whether your child's school will show better overall performance if your child participates in an alternate assessment rather than the regular assessment

If your state offers an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards**, it also must provide guidelines for the IEP team to assist them in making the decision about assessment options. Be sure to get a copy of your state's guidelines prior to your IEP meeting. This document will provide additional information about deciding on the appropriate assessment option for your child.

If the IEP team decides that your child will not participate in the regular assessment for your child's enrolled grade and instead will take an AA-MAS, it also is important that you be informed that your child's achievement in certain academic subjects will be measured based on modified achievement standards. Equally important is that you understand any potential implications if your child participates in this manner. While NCLB does not require — or even encourage — states to use state test performance to make “high stakes” decisions for students (such as grade promotion or graduation with a regular high school diploma) many states have such “high stakes” policies in place. And, while NCLB states that students who take an AA-MAS should not be prohibited from attempting to meet the requirements for a regular high school diploma, you should fully understand your state's graduation requirements and how they relate to special education students who take any form of alternate assessment.

Accommodations for Special Education Students

All states are required to provide appropriate accommodations that special education students need to participate in all state assessments, as well as any assessments required by your school district. In fact, according to the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), approximately 65 percent of special education students use some type of test accommodations when participating in state assessments.

Accommodations used in state assessments should be the same as the accommodations used in day-to-day classroom instruction and classroom tests, to the extent possible. An accommodation should never be introduced for the first time in a state assessment.

States also must provide guidelines for testing accommodations. These guidelines should clearly describe each accommodation that your child can use on the state assessment. Accommodations used during testing must produce a valid score. In other words, if the accommodation changes what the test is measuring, then it may result in an invalid score. IEP teams must select only those accommodations that will produce valid scores.

Students can use test accommodations on **alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS)** just as they can on regular assessments. However, just as with the regular assessment, the accommodations must produce a valid score. Your child's IEP team should first consider whether your child can participate in the regular assessment with accommodations before deciding that an alternate assessment is required.

Accommodations are generally grouped into the following categories:

- **Presentation** (e.g., repeat directions, read aloud, use of larger bubbles on answer sheets)
- **Response** (e.g., mark answers in book, use reference aids, point, use of computer)
- **Timing/Scheduling** (e.g., extended time, frequent breaks)
- **Setting** (e.g., study carrel, special lighting, separate room)

Big Idea 5

Linking Instruction and Assessment to State Academic Content Standards

If your child participates in state assessments required by NCLB by taking an **alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards (AA-MAS)**, federal regulations require that the child's IEP have annual goals that are based on academic content standards for the enrolled grade.

This requirement is an important safeguard to ensure that your child continues to have access to grade-level instruction in the academic subjects for which he is taking an AA-MAS. As previously discussed, a student can take an AA-MAS in one subject, such as reading/language arts and take a regular assessment in another subject, such as math. In such a case, the student's IEP will have annual goals in reading/language arts that are based on the academic content standards for the student's enrolled grade, along with any other goals determined by the IEP team. The goals must clearly indicate the skills and knowledge that your child must attain in order to be proficient on the grade-level standards for the enrolled grade. In most cases, this means that the special education your child is receiving is accelerating learning in order to

close the gap between current performance and performance required for proficiency at grade level.

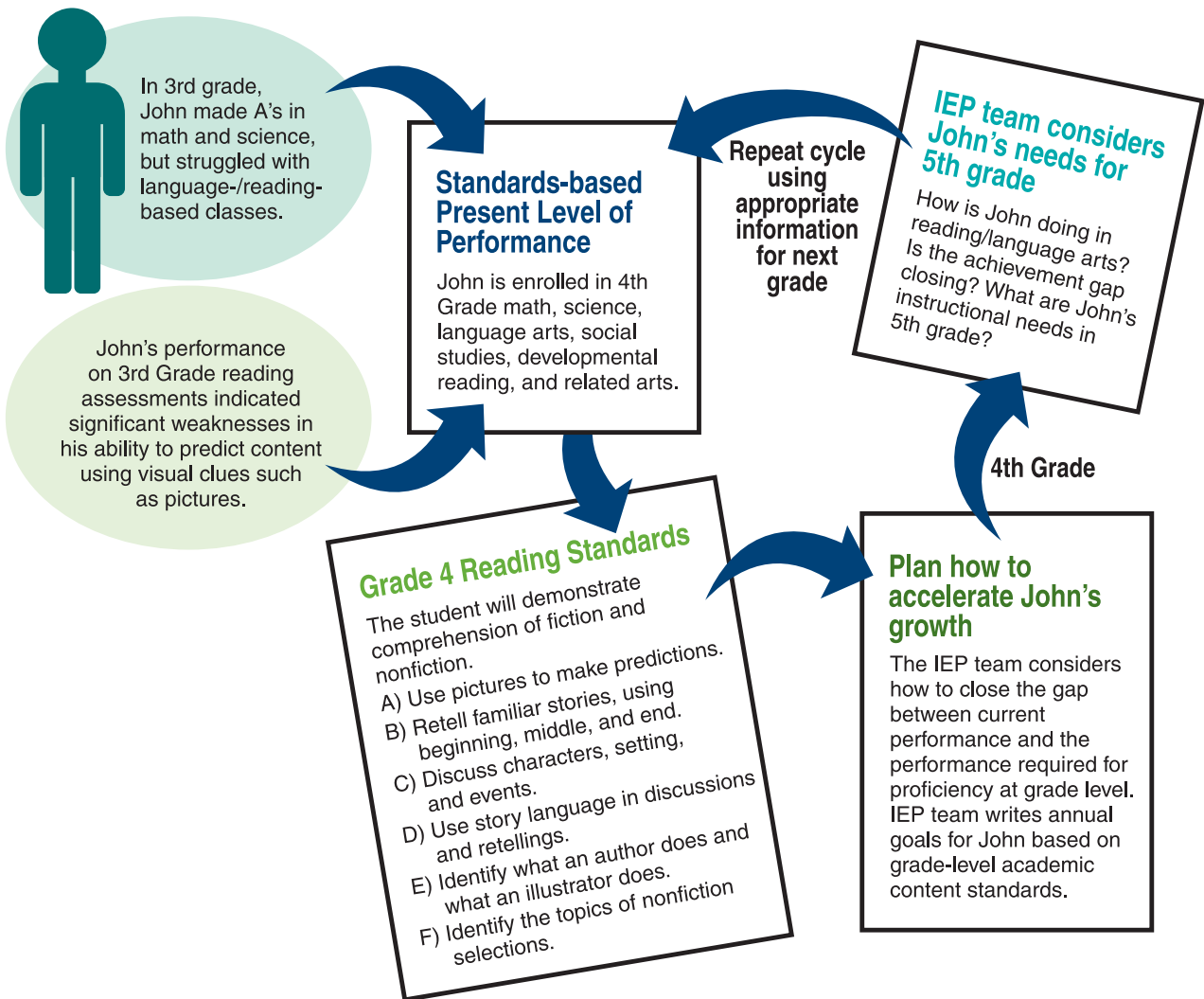
Writing annual goals that address the learning expectations for your child's enrolled grade will require IEP team members to have a good understanding of the state academic content standards. Both general and special education teachers should have an understanding of the learning demands of the academic content standards. Special education teachers provide additional knowledge about ways to individualize instruction to help your child catch up.

Using the academic content standards that are expected of all students at a specific grade level to write the IEP not only gives all educators a common language, but also provides a positive direction for goals and interventions. Instruction and interventions will be based on your child's strengths rather than focused on weaknesses.

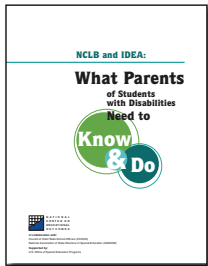
Because annual goals based on grade-level academic content standards are a requirement for the IEP of any student who takes an AA-MAS, states offering this type of alternate assessment also must provide information to assist IEP teams in developing these standards-based goals. Be sure to obtain your state's information on IEP development based on state academic content standards so you

fully understand this process and the role you and your child should play.

By making the most of this requirement, special education students assessed using AA-MAS can and should be expected to make substantial progress in their academic performance.



Additional Resources



NCLB and IDEA: What Parents of Students with Disabilities Need to Know and Do, National Center on Education Outcomes (August 2006). Available at www.NCEO.info/OnlinePubs/Parents.pdf

Alternate Achievement Standards For Students With The Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities Non-Regulatory Guidance (August 2005) (U.S. Department of Education). Available at www.ED.gov

Determining Appropriate Assessment Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, National Center for Learning Disabilities. Available at www.LD.org/NCLB

Learning Opportunities for Your Child Through Alternate Assessments (March 2007) (U.S. Department of Education). Available at www.ED.gov

Making the 'No Child Left Behind Act' Work for Children Who Struggle to Learn: A Parent's Guide, National Center for Learning Disabilities. Available at www.LD.org/NCLB

Modified Academic Achievement Standards Non-Regulatory Guidance (August 2007) (U.S. Department of Education). Available at www.ED.gov

Additional Title I Provisions Included In The Regulations Package on Modified Academic Achievement Standards Published In The Federal Register On April 9, 2007 Non-regulatory Guidance (July 20, 2007) (U.S. Department of Education). Available at www.ED.gov

No Child Left Behind: Understanding Assessment Options for IDEA-eligible Students, National Center for Learning Disabilities. Available at www.LD.org/NCLB

Working Together For Students With Disabilities: Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) And No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) Frequently Asked Questions (December 2005) (U.S. Department of Education). Available at www.ED.gov

