



NCEO Tool 4

District Dialogue Guide: Addressing the Percentage of Students Participating in the Alternate Assessment

1% Toolkit

District Dialogue Guide: Addressing the Percentage of Students Participating in the Alternate Assessment

Kate Nagle, Martha L. Thurlow, Kathy Strunk, Cesar D'Agord, and Tony Ruggiero

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Project Officer: David Egnor



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This District Dialogue Guide was developed through the work of Peer Learning Group (PLG) 1, *Digging into Your Data: Building a 1% Data Analysis and Use Plan*, which took place from February – May, 2019.

In addition to the authors of this document, it took a team to ensure that PLG 1 was successful. Members of this team included, in addition to the authors (in alphabetical order): Anthea Brady, Duane Brown, Maureen Hawes, Susan Hayes, Sheryl Lazarus, Judy Lee, Travis Peterson, Tanner Petry, Chris Rogers, Stephen Ruffini, and Mari Shikuzawa.

Staff from 32 states participated in the PLG 1 webinar calls. The participating states are listed here. This Guide would not exist had it not been for their active participation in PLG 1.

Arizona
Arkansas
Colorado
Delaware
Florida
Georgia
Hawaii
Illinois
Indiana
Iowa
Kansas
Kentucky
Louisiana
Maine
Maryland
Massachusetts
Minnesota
Mississippi
Montana
Nebraska
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
Ohio
Pennsylvania
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin

District Dialogue Guide

Addressing the Percentage of Students Participating in the Alternate Assessment

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), includes a 1.0% cap on state-level participation rates in the alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS). No limit was placed on district or school rates, but districts must provide justifications if they expect their rate to be above the 1.0% threshold. In addition, states are to provide oversight to districts.

These requirements mean that states, districts, schools, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams need to think carefully about which students should be included in the AA-AAAS. Further, districts should examine their data frequently to ensure that state guidelines are being followed and that appropriate decisions are being made for individual students. Small n-sizes make it difficult for a state to use quantitative analyses alone to determine whether a district may need oversight and monitoring. Thus, having district and school staff engage in discussions will help the district develop its justification, if appropriate, for exceeding the 1.0% threshold on AA-AAAS participation.

Purpose of this Dialogue Guide

This dialogue guide is designed to help district, school staff, and stakeholders engage in thoughtful conversations, tailored to their unique contexts, about participation in the AA-AAAS. It encourages frank discussions that can help to identify ways in which to examine a variety of data sources, analysis methods, and other information to gather, all toward the goal of ensuring that appropriate decisions are made about participation in the AA-AAAS. It includes questions that can be modified, as appropriate, for the context in which the discussions occur.

This guide is one of three developed by states and technical assistance centers working together in NCEO's 2019 1.0% Peer Learning Group 1. The two other documents that were developed can support the discussions recommended here. They include:

- *Data Analysis and Use Planning Tool for Examining AA-AAAS Participation.* This tool provides a four-step data analysis framework. It might be used as the first step toward the use of the *Dialogue Guide*.
- *AA-AAAS Data Display Templates.* Several templates are provided as ways to organize data to allow for thoughtful examination of data. These templates might be a second step toward the use of the *Dialogue Guide*.

Federal Law

Alternate assessments were first developed in response to the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which required that all states and districts develop, by the year 2000, alternate assessments for those students with disabilities unable to

participate in regular assessments even with accommodations. IDEA did not define who the students were who could participate in an alternate assessment, nor did it use the term “significant cognitive disability.” In 2003, regulations added to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) allowed states to count as proficient those students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who participated in the alternate assessment and met rigorous alternate achievement standards set by the state.

In 2015 ESSA reaffirmed that an AA-AAAS is the appropriate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. ESSA placed a 1.0% cap on the state participation rate for each subject, based on the total number of all students in the state assessed in the subject (34 CFR 200.6(c)(2)). ESSA specified that states cannot place a cap on the participation rates of local education agencies (LEAs) in any subject (34 CFR 200.6(c)(3)(i)). This means that LEAs can exceed the 1.0% participation threshold on an AA-AAAS in a given subject, but the state as a whole cannot exceed the 1.0% threshold in any subject. ESSA required LEAs that exceed the 1.0% participation threshold to submit information justifying the need to exceed the threshold; in addition, the state must provide oversight and monitoring of those LEAs (34 CFR 200.6(c)(3)(ii-iii)).

Dialogue Guide Procedures, Topics, and Questions

Districts and schools may benefit from creating a team to review multiple sources of data, with the goal of exploring whether students with disabilities are being correctly identified as having the most significant cognitive disabilities and appropriately assigned to an AA-AAAS. Team members could include the director of special education, representatives of school staff who participate as members of an IEP team, curriculum specialists, school principals, school psychologists, related service providers, parents, and for English Learners with disabilities, an English learner specialist.

This dialogue guide consists of questions and considerations for future action by district and school staff. The discussion team may want to start by gaining a common understanding of what each question means and whether it is important for the team to discuss.

What do participation rates on the AA-AAAS look like over time?

- Consider whether the district participation rate in the AA-AAAS is significantly different from the state's participation rate, and if available, whether it is different from the rates of districts of a similar size and location.
- Are there special circumstances that would suggest the participation rate might be higher than expected (e.g., special programs or services attractive to families with children who have particular disabilities, such as autism or intellectual disabilities, etc.)?
- Is the district so small in size that even a minor increase in the number of students taking an AA-AAAS could result in a participation rate exceeding 1.0% from one year to the next?
- Have participation rates in the AA-AAAS increased steadily or suddenly spiked? Has anything occurred in the district that could explain the change? Consider whether families may be moving into the district because of a new program or instructional method offered within the district.
- What has happened in neighboring districts that may have impacted this district? Consider whether a specialized school or program for students with disabilities has closed recently in a nearby district, prompting parents to enter the district.

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by age, grade level, or school level?

- Consider whether participation rates on the AA-AAAS are higher in some grades than others. Do rates jump when students enter middle school or high school? Consider why this may happen.
- Have some students with disabilities previously participated in the general assessment in elementary schools, but then participate in the AA-AAAS when they transition to secondary school? Consider why this may or may not be appropriate.
- Do school staff who are members of IEP teams at different grade levels receive the same training on the state guidelines for participation in an AA-AAAS?
- Consider how less inclusive placements may influence AA-AAAS participation decisions.

What do participation rates on the AA-AAAS look like disaggregated by schools?

- Consider whether participation rates are higher in one school compared to other schools with similar grade levels.
- Have new teachers or administrators joined the school recently? Consider whether new school staff who participate as members of IEP teams need training to understand and implement the state guidelines for participation in an AA-AAAS.
- Does the school have high rates of student mobility? Consider whether parents of students with disabilities new to the school need to better understand the state's guidelines for participation in an AA-AAAS so they may provide meaningful input related to their child's participation decision.
- Are there more self-contained programs in secondary schools compared to elementary schools? Consider whether this is influencing participation decisions.
- What do participation rates look like in charter schools or other unique types of schools (e.g., alternative schools, community programs)? Consider whether charter school staff who participate as members of IEP teams need training to better understand and implement the state's guidelines for participation in an AA-AAAS.

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by content areas?

- Consider whether participation rates are different in reading, mathematics, and science.
- Consider whether having science assessments only at one grade in each school level (elementary, middle, high) affects science AA-AAAS participation rates?
- If AA-AAAS participation varies by content area, is this consistent with state guidelines?
- Consider whether accommodations policies (for general assessment and AA-AAAS) affect assessment participation decisions in English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, and science?
- Do schools receive training in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to develop instructional objectives, assignments, and assessments?
- Do school staff who participate as members of IEP teams know how to develop standards-based IEPs for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by student demographics?

- Consider whether participation rates are different for certain subgroups (e.g., black, Hispanic, Asian, White, English learners, economically disadvantaged) compared to the district rate as a whole and compared to other subgroups. Are some subgroups disproportionately participating in the AA-AAAS?
- Do the guidelines established by the state for participation in an AA-AAAS clearly describe participation criteria? Do they provide information about not allowable (or acceptable) considerations for determining participation in an AA-AAAS?
- Do IEP team members need training to understand the state's definition of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities? Do they need training to understand and implement the guidelines established by the state for participation in an AA-AAAS?

- Consider whether general education and special education teachers are encouraged to use culturally responsive curricula and evidence-based practices for English learners in their classrooms.
- Do schools with high rates of English learners, minority students, or economically disadvantaged students have access to additional resources and additional enrichment activities? Consider whether students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have access to these resources and activities.

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by disability category?

- Are many students with disabilities other than intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities (such as specific learning disabilities, speech language impairment, emotional disturbance, or other health impairments) participating in the AA-AAAS?
- Consider whether school staff who participate as members of IEP teams understand the state’s definition of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and understand and implement the state’s guidelines for participation in an AA-AAAS.
- Consider whether some parents of students with disabilities may select the AA-AAAS because they are concerned that the general assessment will be too difficult or stressful for their child.
- Do school staff who participate as members of IEP teams have high expectations for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by placement?

- Consider whether students in restrictive settings are more likely to participate in the AA-AAAS. Why might this occur?
- Consider how students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are involved and make progress in the general education curriculum.
- Consider whether special education teachers have sufficient content knowledge to provide instruction in the general education curriculum. What professional development in mathematics, ELA, and science is provided to special education teachers?
- Consider whether students with the most significant cognitive disabilities receive supports, including assistive technology and accommodations necessary to enable them to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum in the general education classroom.

What do AA-AAAS participation rates look like disaggregated by performance level?

- Consider whether some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities repeatedly score proficient and advanced on the AA-AAAS in one or more content areas. Do school staff who participate as members of IEP teams consider whether these students could participate in the general assessment with the necessary supports and accommodations?

- Consider whether school staff who participate as members of IEP teams may base assessment decisions on concerns about the impact of student scores on accountability ratings.

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