



# Frequently Asked Questions and Answers About the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System

Regulations for Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states to make available to eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities an alternate assessment designed to measure their knowledge and skills (34 CFR §§ 200.1(d) and 300.160 (c)). Connecticut’s alternate assessment system for students with significant cognitive disabilities is composed of the following:

- The Connecticut Alternate Assessment (CTAA) for English language arts and mathematics for eligible students in Grades 3-8 and 11;
- The Connecticut Alternate Science (CTAS) Assessment for eligible students in Grades 5, 8, and 11; and
- The Collaborative for the Alternate Assessment of English Language Proficiency (CAAELP) for students identified as an English learner/multilingual learner (EL/ML) with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades K-12.

This document serves as a Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) resource for frequently asked questions (FAQ) related to the Alternate Assessment System and implications of state and federal legislation including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This FAQ document will be updated to add new questions and answers as important issues arise or amended as new information is clarified.

This FAQ document is intended to provide local education agencies (LEAs), parents, advocacy organizations, and other interested parties with information regarding the requirements for serving Connecticut’s children with significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate assessments. This document represents the current understanding of the CSDE on this topic. This guidance does not impose any additional requirements beyond those required under applicable law and regulations.

## 1. What does “significant cognitive disabilities” mean?

**Answer:** Students with significant cognitive disabilities are a relatively small population who: (1) are identified with one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (for example: intellectually disabled, autism, multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury, which are the most common); and (2) have cognitive impairments that may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with systematic instruction and accommodations.

Additionally, student records indicate a pervasive disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior defined as *essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life*.

## 2. Why is it necessary to confirm that the student requires extensive, repeated instruction using adapted materials and individualized methods to access the grade- and age-appropriate curricula?

**Answer:** Unlike the standard assessments that provide for greater access in a subject area using designated supports and accommodations as needed, or access to grade level language domains to demonstrate proficiency, the CTAA, the CTAS, and the CAAELP assessments are designed for the student who: (a) requires extensive, repeated, instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature; and (b) uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, demonstrate, and transfer skills. Access is generally provided in a systematic manner, across multiple settings and subject areas, allowing these students greater opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. Students who do not require extensive, repeated, and individualized instruction, nor use substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curricula are expected to be able to access Connecticut’s standard assessments with requisite designated supports, accommodations, and assistive technology (if applicable) as indicated by their Individualized Education Program (IEP).

### **3. Why does Connecticut need alternate assessments?**

**Answer:** Alternate assessments are designed to measure the knowledge and skills of students with significant cognitive disabilities as required by the IDEA and ESSA. Alternate assessments are designed to support student independence to the greatest extent possible by making academic and language content accessible and the expected achievement levels appropriate. The CTAA is aligned to the same Connecticut Core Standards (CCS) used to instruct and assess all of Connecticut's public school students in English language arts and mathematics. The CTAS is aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). The CAAELP is aligned to the Connecticut English Language Proficiency (CELP) Standards.

### **4. What is the Connecticut Alternate Assessment?**

**Answer:** The CTAA is an alternate assessment of English language arts and mathematics aligned to the CCS for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 3-8 and 11. It is a secure test accessed via an online platform during the CSDE's testing window. Teachers administering any alternate assessment must be trained by the CSDE **each** year prior to administering the assessments to each student individually. Accessibility features and accommodations are available based on the needs of each student.

### **5. What is the Connecticut Alternate Science Assessment?**

**Answer:** The CTAS is an assessment of the Next Generation Science Standards for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 5, 8, and 11. This alternate assessment is non-secure and is administered to students by a CSDE trained teacher over the course of the school year. The teacher supports students throughout the school year in the completion of specific Performance Tasks aligned to the NGSS content and can provide embedded scaffolding for students who require additional supports when responding to the activities.

### **6. What is the Connecticut Alternate Assessment for English Language Proficiency?**

**Answer:** The CAAELP is an assessment of English Language Proficiency Standards for eligible ELs/MLs with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades K-12. It is a secure test accessed via an online platform during the defined testing window. Teachers administering any alternate assessment must be trained **each** year prior to administering the assessments to each student individually. The CAAELP is used to determine if the eligible student meets the criteria to exit English language acquisition support services. Accessibility features and accommodations are available based on the needs of each student.

### **7. Why is it necessary to ensure that the student is learning content linked to and derived from the CCS and NGSS?**

**Answer:** All Connecticut public school students are expected to be provided instruction aligned to the CCS and the NGSS. The CTAA assesses grade-level content linked to and derived from the CCS, which are the academic standards for English language arts and mathematics expected for all Connecticut students. The IEP goals and objectives should be based on the general education curriculum defined in the CCS for all Connecticut students. The CTAA has been developed to ensure that all eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to the grade-level CCS.

Similarly, eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 5, 8, and 11 are assessed in science using the CTAS, which is aligned to the grade-level NGSS allowing students to access the content and demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level science standards.

**8. Why is it necessary to ensure that the student is learning content linked to and derived from the CELP standards?**

**Answer:** All students identified as EL/ML in the public school system are expected to demonstrate their English language proficiency skills annually. The CELP standards describe the language necessary for students to complete grade-appropriate tasks, while continually developing English proficiency. Content aligned to and derived from the CELP standards define the tested domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The IEP goals and objectives include supports for English language development for these eligible students. The CAAELP assessment provides eligible students identified as EL/ML with significant cognitive disabilities the ability to participate in an assessment that measures what they know and can do in relation to the CELP standards.

**9. How is eligibility for Connecticut’s Alternate Assessment System determined?**

**Answer:** To ensure that **only** students with documented evidence of a **significant cognitive disability** participate in Connecticut’s Alternate Assessment System, PPTs use the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System Eligibility Form. This form requires the submission of critical evidence such as the documentation of assessment data, typically included in the IEP, to describe the student’s present levels of performance and eligibility for special education services. It collects information on the student’s intellectual functioning, adaptive behavior skills, and confirms that the student receives extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and academic support across all academic and non-academic areas. A draft is completed by trained teachers and is then discussed by the PPT to determine if the student qualifies for the alternate assessments. Using the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System Eligibility Form, the PPT must verify that the student has a significant cognitive disability by providing the following evidence:

1. Student has an intellectual impairment with supporting evidence per cognitive testing, or other details/evidence exist to substantiate the existence of an intellectual impairment;
2. Student’s adaptive behavior skills are well below age-level expectations with supporting evidence per adaptive behavior assessment(s) (e.g., scored more than 1.5 standard deviations below the mean score); and
3. Student requires intensive instruction and significant supports.

Eligible students participating in the alternate assessments represent a relatively small group of students who, due to their disability cannot meaningfully participate in standard assessments (Smarter Balanced, Connecticut SAT School Day, NGSS Standard Assessment, or LAS Links for students identified as EL/ML), even when provided accommodations. The CSDE continues to monitor the characteristics of students participating in the alternate assessments in accordance with federal guidance. Only these students, meeting all three criteria, should be participating in the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System. Students who do not meet all three criteria for eligibility would be expected to participate in the standard assessment, typically with designated supports, accommodations, and assistive technology (if applicable) as indicated in the assessment areas of their IEP.

**10. Why is it important to identify the most appropriate primary disability category?**

**Answer:** The CSDE continues to monitor assessment participation as required by federal regulations. Although, there is no federal restriction on the primary disability for participation in an alternate assessment, certain disabilities, by their nature, would encourage greater justification for participation. For example, the selection of alternate assessments for students with the primary disability of Learning Disability, Specific Learning Disability (SLD)/Dyslexia, and Emotional Disturbance may not meet the eligibility criteria because these students may not have evidence supporting a significant cognitive disability that is pervasive in nature. Sections 34 CFR 300.309 (3)(a)(1) and (2)

and 300.8(c)(4)(i) of the IDEA requires that intellectual factors/impairments be ruled out in order to qualify for special education services under the categories of a specific learning disability or emotional disturbance. Therefore, these students would most likely participate in the standard state-wide assessments: Smarter Balanced when enrolled in Grades 3-8, NGSS when enrolled in Grades 5, 8, or 11, the Connecticut SAT School Day for students enrolled in Grade 11, or the LAS Links if the student is an EL/ML in grades K-12. Students would test with the use of designated supports, accommodations, and assistive technology (if applicable) as indicated per their IEP. Otherwise, the PPT may need to reevaluate the student's primary disability.

In order for a student to qualify for the alternate assessment, there must be evidence to support that the student:

- has an intellectual impairment (per results from cognitive assessment or other established evidence to substantiate the existence of an intellectual impairment);
- has adaptive behavior skills well below age level expectations (per adaptive behavior assessment); and
- requires intensive instruction and significant supports.

The CSDE may request districts provide added assurance or evidence for information submitted on the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System Eligibility Form that is of concern.

## **11. How is the most appropriate assessment selected?**

**Answer:** Best practice is for the assessment decision to be made by a comprehensive team, such as the PPT, comprised of those directly involved with the student, who are also knowledgeable of the age-appropriate grade-level curriculum, and with specific expertise regarding the student's strengths and areas of concern. If the student is also an identified EL/ML, an individual with English language development expertise should be included. High expectations should guide the process. Teams should initiate discussions as if the student would participate in the standard assessment, defining how the student will access the content of the assessment using designated supports and accommodations as needed. Evidence is shared defining the needs and characteristics of the student and their access to grade-level content in instruction and for assessment.

If evidence indicates the access needs for the standard assessments cannot be met- even if provided designated supports, accommodations, assistive technology or special documented accommodations typically used in instruction, then the criteria for the Alternate Assessment System should be explored. If the student meets all three components of the eligibility criteria as described by the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System Eligibility Form, the PPT may develop the student's IEP and select the appropriate alternate assessment indicated in the assessment area of the IEP document.

## **12. Why is communication competency so important for students, especially those with significant cognitive disabilities?**

**Answer:** In order to determine if a student understands the content presented, the student needs to be able to communicate in a manner that is understood by another individual. The alternate assessment system is designed to provide access to the assessment using a student's preferred mode of communication, allowing them to demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level standards. The alternate assessments provide opportunities for the use of assistive technology, expressive and receptive communication supports, and accommodations included in the student's IEP that are consistent with Connecticut assessment policies.

The CSDE recognizes the importance of communication in instruction and assessment and supports the National Center and State Collaboration (NCSC) definition of communication

competency as the ability to use a communication system that enables students to gain and demonstrate knowledge. Communication competency prior to the third grade is the foundation the CSDE strives toward. It is a priority for students to establish communicative competency to reliably access curriculum, receive content related information from others, and to consistently demonstrate their skills ultimately improving post-school outcomes.

**13. How is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) included in the alternate assessments?**

**Answer:** Alternate assessments are designed with the principles of [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#). For example, the entire CTAA test, including passages, items, and response options, are read to the student by the trained test administrator or the embedded text-to-speech accessibility feature. Additional built-in supports include reduced passage length in reading, pictures and graphics included to help students understand test content, along with models in reading, writing, and mathematics, and common geometric shapes and smaller numbers on the mathematics test. The CTAS provides guidance for trained teachers to use meaningful content-aligned Performance Tasks using the preferred communication methods of the student and embedded supports and scaffolding to rate how the student demonstrates what they know and can do related to science. The CAAELP also incorporates the principles of universal design and will be read to eligible students for greater access.

**14. Where can I find more information about Connecticut’s Alternate Assessment System?**

**Answer:** The following links provide more specific information related to the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System:

[CSDE Comprehensive Assessment Program Portal Alternate Assessments;](#)

[CSDE Special Populations webpage;](#)

[CSDE Alternate Assessment System webpage;](#)

[CSDE Student Assessment webpage;](#)

[Connecticut Alternate Assessment Eligibility Form](#)

[Connecticut Alternate Assessment System Participation Guidance for Planning and Placement Teams](#)

[English Language Proficiency Assessment](#)