

NH Alternate Assessment:
General Information for Parents
2008



General Background Information for Parents About the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment

The participation of all students in large-scale assessment programs, such as the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) and New Hampshire Alternate Assessment (NH-Alt), is important to ensure that all students are provided an opportunity to learn the academic skills identified as being most critical for New Hampshire students. These skills are described in the New Hampshire Curriculum Frameworks.

Federal and state education laws, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA '04), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and NH RSA 193:C require that students with disabilities have access to the general academic curriculum, with appropriate accommodations and supports, and that they be assessed on the same general curriculum standards as all other students. *In addition*, for the small number of students who cannot participate in the paper and pencil general state assessment based on grade-level achievement standards- even with the best instruction and with accommodations, New Hampshire provides a statewide Alternate Assessment, based on *alternate* academic achievement standards. These alternate achievement standards are designed to meet the needs of students with severe cognitive disabilities. The purpose of this document is to answer some common general questions about the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment.

Who participates in the NH Alternate Assessment?

Only those students who have the ***most severe cognitive disabilities*** and are unable to demonstrate achievement of grade-level academic standards, even with the best instruction and with appropriate accommodations, may participate in the Alternate Assessment, which is based on *alternate achievement standards*. In New Hampshire, alternately assessed students, with teacher assistance, produce portfolios that include samples of student work and data showing the progress the student has made on academic content skills in a given school year. Four criteria must be met for a student to qualify for participation. The student must:

1. Be currently enrolled in grades 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, or 11, and-
2. Have an active IEP, and-
3. There must be evidence that the student's demonstrated cognitive disability and adaptive behavior skills *prevent him or her* from demonstrating achievement of the grade-level proficiency standards described in the New Hampshire Curriculum Frameworks, *even with best instruction and with appropriate accommodations*, and-
4. There must be historical data (current and longitudinal across multiple settings) that confirm the student criteria listed above.

✦ What are characteristics of students appropriately served in the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment?

The following characteristics occur *in combination*—*not* in isolation:

- **Limited Communication:** The student may be considered nonverbal or may have very limited expressive vocabulary and language skills. The student may use simple language structures to communicate and seldom acquires new communication skills through incidental learning. Most NH-Alt students do talk and have some limited, *very basic* writing skills, but each of these students shows a *substantial delay* in the development of language skills relative to the skills of same-aged peers; *and*
- **Very Low Levels of Academic Achievement:** Performance in the subject matters of reading, writing, and mathematics is significantly below that of same-aged peers (e.g., *performance-level expectations must be modified to a reduced or simpler level of performance from the curriculum standards set for general education or “typical” New Hampshire students*). When typical general education peers are reading paragraphs and answering questions, the Alternate Assessment student might be matching objects, pictures, or symbols, and when typical peers are writing and solving equations, the Alternate Assessment student might be using objects, symbol systems, or pictures to show more basic connections; *and*
- **Highly Specialized Instruction:** The student generally requires systematic instruction with tasks broken into small steps. In addition, the student needs deliberate instruction to apply learned skills across multiple settings (e.g., school, home, work, and other settings); *and*
- **Ample Supports:** The student requires individualized instructional, technological, or interpersonal supports to make progress in learning. The student *requires accommodations* to demonstrate proficiency of even the *modified* performance expectation levels described above, such as modeling and repeated demonstration, physical hand-over-hand guidance, specially designed prompting procedures, and alternate or augmented communication systems.

✦ Why are students with disabilities required to participate in the state Assessment Program?

The full participation of students with disabilities in state and district Assessment Programs is required by law. This is to ensure that each student has access to and progresses in the state’s general curriculum to the maximum extent possible. Schools should use the assessment results to direct instructional attention and resources to all students who are assessed. This will lead to improved student learning. The goal of holding schools accountable for every student’s performance is to increase the achievement of students with disabilities. The information collected will also help each Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to assess and instruct each student appropriately.

✦ **I understand that all students must participate in statewide assessment, but who determines how a student *with disabilities* will participate in the state Assessment Program?**

The student's IEP team (which includes the parent or guardian) decides how (not if) the student will participate in the state Assessment Program. The team must come to agreement and document this decision in the IEP. The state has developed participation guidelines to support and inform IEP teams as they make participation decisions. Under IDEA '04, all students with disabilities must participate in state and district general assessments in one of the 3 ways: 1. NECAP general grade level assessment with no accommodations, 2. NECAP general grade level assessment with accommodations, or NH Alternate Assessment based on *alternate* standards. The state publishes participation guidelines that offer information regarding who must participate in statewide assessment and under what circumstances students may be exempted from participation. Exemptions are extremely limited. Examples include serious medical emergency (but not chronic medical fragility), or enrolling in NH from another state after the test window has closed. Limited exemptions from state reading and writing assessments are also available for students who have been in US schools for less than one year. These participation guidelines can be found on the New Hampshire Department of Education Web site: www.ed.state.nh.us/assessment under the "NECAP" heading. Once on this page, Choose: "Fall (current year) Materials and Information".

✦ **How will students with significant disabilities, who are unable to participate in the general state Assessment Program, be assessed?**

The New Hampshire Department of Education has developed a portfolio-based Alternate Assessment. The Department of Education requires schools to measure student progress in specified academic standards across the school year, and the IEP team members determine which targeted academic skills will be sampled from classroom work to demonstrate the student's knowledge and growth in these skills. Each NH-Alt Portfolio includes classroom data on student progress and several samples of actual student work in reading, mathematics and, in selected grades, writing and science. Student portfolios also contain documents showing opportunities for students to make choices and think about their own learning. This part of the portfolio is called evidence of "Self-Determination". All student work samples and data are based on identified curriculum standards within the New Hampshire Curriculum Frameworks. The use of a portfolio allows the team to match the requirements of the assessment with the instructional needs of the student. Even students with the most limited skills can successfully participate in this process.

What about students who are medically fragile or just miss several days of the year from school?

Students who are medically fragile or miss several days of school and are *qualified* to participate in the alternate portfolio assessment should participate when present in school or, if home-based instruction is put in place, the teacher will want to continue to collect data in the home. Any extensive time out from school should be noted on the student's

progress chart or graph. *Any student who receives public instruction must participate in statewide assessment of academic progress.*

There are some very limited situations where students with medical emergencies *above and beyond chronic medical fragility* may receive special consideration and be exempted from participation. *Schools must apply for this exemption formally and in writing.* Students with long term intensive medical needs or who are medically “fragile” are not automatically considered for medical exemption. The rule of thumb is that if a child can receive educational services and instruction, assessment can also occur.

✦ **Who administers the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment?**

A complete picture of the student’s academic achievement will be assembled during each year of participation. To accomplish this, the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment will be administered by all the student’s teachers working in close collaboration (general and special education), with input from other specialists and from parents. Parental input is required. In the absence of parental input, schools must document all attempts to obtain it. This documentation must be kept in the school records.

✦ **What should IEP teams do to prepare for Alternate Assessment?**

- Ensure that *all* students with disabilities have meaningful access to the general academic curriculum.
- Ensure that all special education teachers and IEP team members review and understand the NH Curriculum Frameworks and the critical functions (or skills) that lie at the heart of each academic content standard.
- Select targeted skills that represent important learning goals for the student. (These must be linked in meaningful and age appropriate ways to the curriculum standards in the required content areas.)

✦ **What is the parent/guardian role in the Alternate Assessment process?**

Parents and/or guardians, as members of the IEP team, are involved in the decision to include the student in Alternate Assessment. In addition to their involvement with the IEP team, there are other responsibilities of the parent and/or guardian. These include:

- Reviewing and responding to portfolio-related consent forms prior to the beginning of the portfolio process, and
- Reviewing the completed student portfolio and signing the Parent/Guardian Portfolio Review Statement.
- On this Portfolio Review Statement, parents/guardians have the chance to express their opinion about the portfolio. Parent comments are welcomed and valued. They are important in helping to improve our assessment processes.

✦ **How can teachers and administrators prepare to implement the Alternate Assessment?**

Each year, the New Hampshire Department of Education publishes an Educators' Manual to Alternate Assessment. This manual provides the basis for three extensive training sessions each year with educators who are involved in developing student portfolios. Teachers from all content areas, including general education teachers, should receive this information. Training on how to develop high-quality portfolios and implement the process is provided. It is recommended that teachers attend all three training sessions offered each year (once in fall, winter, and spring). The NH Department of Education employs two full-time NH-Alternate Assessment Field Coaches who specialize in training educators to conduct the NH Alternate Assessment. They conduct both large group and, by appointment, smaller onsite training sessions.

Teachers and administrators should also ensure that students with disabilities have access to the *same resources and opportunities* for learning that are afforded to students without disabilities. Including students in classroom activities that specifically address the NH Curriculum Frameworks is crucial if they are to develop the required skills to meet these challenging standards and be prepared for the Alternate Assessment. IEP teams should work diligently to provide all students with an effective means of communication and access to assistive technology.

✦ **The Central Importance of Identifying & Supporting Student Communication Needs:**

There is no more limiting experience in school, than not being able to express one's own needs, wants, and ideas. Communication exchange is the way we all learn. It represents the way students take information into themselves, and the way students express themselves to others and, thereby, receive important feedback from the world. Without an effective means of communicating, students cannot meet the most basic human needs, and cannot grow in academic skills. Students who participate in alternate assessment *all* have limited communication skills and *many of these students require assistive or augmented communication systems of support* in order to engage and genuinely participate in school activities. Every student can communicate. The question is: how?

Teams must develop deep understanding of the communication needs of every alternately assessed student, and provide the resources required to support those needs. This is the **MOST** important way alternately assessed students are supported in their public school experience.

✦ **How will the Alternate Assessment results be reported and used?**

The results of Alternate Assessment on each student with disabilities will be reported confidentially to parents and the student's teachers. In addition, public group-based school, district, and state assessment summary reports are posted each year on the NH Department of Education website at: www.ed.state.nh.us (on the left side of the screen you'll see a list of topics. Scroll down and choose: *School District Profile*). Individual student results should be used to inform student instruction and related planning. Summary level results provide information on how well our programs are meeting the needs of this student population.

Every parent and every school will also receive an Interpretive Guide that explains how all student portfolios were evaluated and scored.

✦ **How can I get more information about the NH Alternate Assessment?**

More information about the New Hampshire Alternate Assessment is available from the New Hampshire Department of Education and from Measured Progress. In addition, more information can be found on the Web pages of both the Department of Education and Measured Progress. Personal contact information is given below.

General inquiries may be directed to:

Susan Morgan, NHDoe, Program Specialist, at:
smorgan@ed.state.nh.us, (603) 271- 3719

Policy and other inquiries may be directed to:

Gaye Fedorchak, NHDoe,
Supervisor of NH Alternate Assessment and Access Support, at:
gfedorchak@ed.state.nh.us, (603) 271-7383

Online Information Available:

Here is the web site for the NH Alternate Assessment:

*<http://www.ed.state.nh.us/assessment>
(Once there, choose: NH-Alternate Assessment)*