



**Summary of NCSC Policy Paper:
Alternate Assessments Based on Common Core State Standards:
How Do They Relate to College and Career Readiness?¹**

Alternate Assessments

All students, including students with the most significant disabilities, have the right to participate and make progress in the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997, 2004). Also, all students must be assessed each year on grade-level content in math and reading/language arts in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also called the No Child Left Behind Act-NCLB). States are permitted to use an alternate assessment on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. An AA-AAS is required to be based on the same grade-level content identified for all students, but there are different expectations for achievement on that content than there are for students who are taking the general state assessment.

Common Core State Standards

In 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association released a set of academic content standards in reading/language arts and mathematics referred to as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). (<http://www.corestandards.org>). As of March 2013, the CCSS had been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. The CCSS are based on the skills students need for success in education after high school (post-secondary education) and work. Therefore, college and career readiness was the focus of the CCSS development.

As a result of this focus, it becomes important to describe what college and career readiness means for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The National Alternate Assessment Center (NAAC) paper “What Does ‘College and Career Ready’ Mean for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities,” made the following recommendations for improving college and career readiness for these students²:

1. Communicative competence (having effective methods for communication) should be addressed as a priority, and as the basis of everything else.
2. Fluency (ease) in reading, writing, and math are necessary for lifelong learning, community involvement, and success in the workplace.

¹ Original paper being summarized is posted as “AA-AAS College and Career Ready Standards PDF” at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>

² Posted under Publications at <http://www.naacpartners.org>

3. Age-appropriate social skills and the ability to work effectively with others are essential for future education and employment.
4. Independent work skills, as well as the ability to recognize the need for and request assistance, are critical for lifelong learning and on-the-job success.
5. Skills in getting help from support systems are essential for long-term success. Individuals with the most significant cognitive disabilities will continue to need supports to achieve their highest potential.

The purpose of this National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) paper is to build on the NAAC paper. It explains the relationship between the math and language arts knowledge that an AA-AAS is intended to measure and the concept of college and career readiness. The discussion is based on the approach of the NCSC, which is developing a common AA-AAS to be implemented across 26 partner states.³ The NCSC AA-AAS will be one part of a system of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

A Comprehensive System of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The NCSC approach is to build these assessments as key parts of a broader system, which includes curriculum and instruction. Assessing students without first providing opportunities for learning in a challenging, grade-level curriculum can hardly be expected to result in meaningful changes in student outcomes. NCSC focuses on the essential knowledge for improved college, career, and community outcomes. Given the large range of abilities of the students who take an AA-AAS this also means ensuring that no student is excluded.

Thus, the NCSC system of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is built on a foundation of communicative competence, so that students have a reliable way to receive information from others and to show others what they know. Students must be able to communicate personal needs, and share information, ideas, questions, and comments about the daily events in their lives and the world in which they live. For students who have not yet developed communicative competence, this must be a priority objective for them now. With recent technology advances, there are many approaches to develop communication systems that allow students to participate in instruction and interaction throughout the day.

College and career readiness in the NCSC model also includes community readiness. Life beyond high school is more than just going to work or college. We learn to become responsible citizens, to vote, to participate in volunteer projects and recreational activities, we develop a network of friends, access health care, make necessary purchases, manage money, and take care of our household and personal needs.

³ A list of NCSC state and center partners can be found at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/about>

Exhibit 1- The Foundational Principles of the NCSC Alternate Assessment

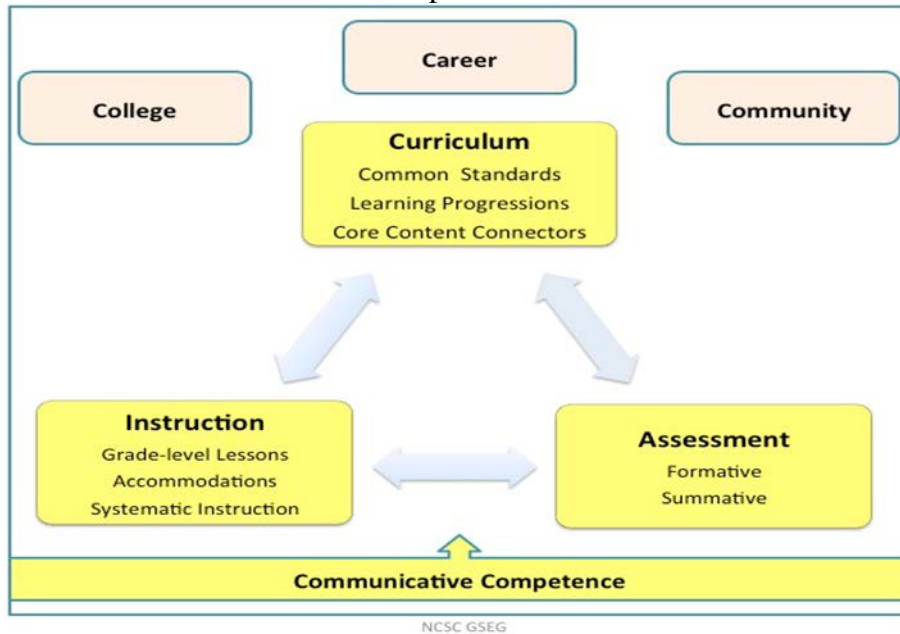


Exhibit 1 shows the relationship of the elements of curriculum, instruction and assessment. It also reflects the importance of communicative competence and preparation for a full life in the community.

Instruction

In order to maximize learning opportunities with their peers (classmates without disabilities), it is important for students with significant cognitive disabilities to be provided with access to grade-level content/lessons, needed accommodations and systematic evidence-based instruction.

It is important that students with significant cognitive disabilities use instructional materials and participate in activities that are age-appropriate and that allow them to progress with their peers. Shared learning experiences with same age peers provide opportunities to develop necessary social skills and to practice essential communication skills. The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provide a framework for educators to use multiple ways to teach the content, multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge and multiple ways to engage ALL learners. Individualization, including any additional accommodations, is built into grade-level lessons.

Systematic, evidence-based instruction ensures that instruction is based on research that shows how students learn. It provides frequent opportunities for student responses, students are given immediate feedback on whether their responses are correct and there are ongoing checks for student understanding. It also means that instructional changes are based on a careful and continuous review of the student's performance.

Curriculum

The "Curriculum" element in the learning triangle in Diagram 1 refers to the NCSC framework for helping teachers understand and modify curriculum based on CCSS. Part of the challenge of providing access to the general education curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities is determining how to make it meaningful. Students may need reduced breadth

(number of topics or objectives to learn), depth (the levels of understanding expected for each topic/objective), or complexity (e.g., the time, steps and memory involved) compared to typical peers.

The NCSC model is based on a prioritized portion of the CCSS that supports access to the general education curriculum in each grade, at reduced depth, breadth, and complexity when necessary. It also promotes meaningful participation in grade-level instruction with peers without disabilities. NCSC has created two tools to assist in the planning process: the Learning Progression Framework and the Core Content Connectors.

The Learning Progression Framework is the pathway that students typically take toward mastering skills for college and career readiness, as they move through the grades. Learning targets are the stepping stones (“the big ideas”) that students learn as they move along that path. Experts at NCSC looked at these learning targets together with the grade-level content expectations from the CCSS. They used this information to identify prioritized academic content to guide the instruction and assessment of students with significant cognitive disabilities from kindergarten through high school. This prioritized content is referred to as the Core Content Connectors (CCCs). Each CCC represents a teachable and assessable part of the content. Related CCCs are used in lessons to create deeper understanding. The CCCs are specifically intended to promote success as students advance with their peers without disabilities to the next grade. They are the starting point for instruction, not necessarily everything an individual student can and should learn.

Assessment

The final element of the NCSC learning triangle in Diagram 1 is the assessment itself. There are both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments take place throughout the school year, are built into the instructional materials and provide regular feedback about student progress. The annual summative assessment discussed here is the NCSC Alternate Assessment. It will give schools and districts the information they need to provide additional instructional and curriculum resources to teachers. In addition, the results of the summative assessment should be useful to educators in identifying appropriate instructional goals and objectives, as well as ongoing supports, for each student. A student’s summative assessment score is just one measure of college and career readiness.

The Role of Professional Development

An underlying assumption in the NCSC model is that materials and resources are necessary to assist special and general education teachers in understanding and using the content standards and information on how the curriculum progresses from grade to grade. Without these materials and resources, the curriculum and instruction will not have the necessary impact for students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or students may simply not have access to instruction based on the content standards.

A system of professional development that includes materials and training resources helps teachers understand the content of the curriculum. In addition, sample units and lessons provide teachers with examples for how to develop and use lessons based on the content. Next, a set of evidence-based instructional practices give teachers the tools they need to provide high quality instruction. Finally, modules (online training units) are important to help teachers develop their own lessons and provide student supports. A comprehensive set of professional development

resources ensures that students have been prepared to participate in the assessment. It also ensures that the results of the assessment are valid and useful to Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams in identifying individualized learning goals and on-going supports.

Educators and parents in every state can view and use materials and training resources developed by NCSC, whether or not they are in a NCSC partner state. They are posted on the NCSC Wiki at https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/mediawiki/index.php/Main_Page. For a description of each component of the NCSC Curriculum and Instructional Resources see the document called The NCSC Diagram and Explanation at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources>.

The Relationship of the NCSC Assessment to College and Career Readiness

Because NCSC's summative assessment is given during a 1-2 month window of time each year, there are limits to what can be said about college and career readiness for students with significant cognitive disabilities based on that assessment alone.

Therefore, individual teaching items at each grade within the NCSC curriculum-instruction-assessment model are designed to measure the ability to apply concepts and skills to new problems (generalization). Whenever possible the items are linked to problems that the students are likely to face in life and at work. This supports college and career readiness. For example, an algebra item can help a student calculate the money he would make, after paying for both transportation and lunch, if he earned \$10 an hour for six hours. Similarly, a high school item in reading may ask the student to read a story of how one student discussed career goals with family members and teachers. This helps students understand why obtaining information from a variety of sources is important for key life decisions.

Alternate assessments are designed to measure predictors of post-school success related to the knowledge and skills that are learned through academic content. They do not measure other evidence-based predictors of post-school success. It is important to list these other predictors in this paper to assist teachers, administrators, families, and students in making sure that the student's IEP or Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) includes these additional predictors. Together with challenging academic content linked to grade-level content standards, they will prepare the student for a successful and fulfilling life.

Developing the Additional Elements of College and Career Readiness: What Tests Cannot Measure but Students Still Need:

Among the factors directly related to post-school success for students with significant cognitive disabilities that alternate assessments cannot fully measure are:

1. Self-determination;
2. Student involvement in the IEP planning process;
3. Community-based vocational (job) training and paid employment while in school;
4. Community-based instruction;
5. Inclusion in general education classes;
6. Social interaction skills and opportunities with peers;

7. Knowledge of one's own support needs;
8. Interagency transition collaboration; and
9. Role of the student's Transition/IEP team in creating ongoing supports and links with support providers (in other agencies) to meet transition goals.

Each of these factors is described below.

Self-Determination

Self-determination refers to the ability of students to direct their own lives and to make important decisions related to their education and career. This ability is strongly related to positive post-school outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities. Self-determination involves skills that can be taught through carefully designed instruction. However, opportunities to teach self-determination skills to students with significant cognitive disabilities are often missed.

IEP teams need to make sure that students are taught how to set academic, personal, and life-course (e.g., employment) goals, develop plans to achieve those goals, and to track progress toward their goals. NCSC's alternate assessment is not a direct measure of self-determination. However, at the middle and high school grades, performance on the NCSC assessment requires skills that are important elements of self-determination.

Student Involvement in the IEP Planning Process

Student involvement in the IEP process is an opportunity to improve self-determination skills for planning one's future. Students need opportunities like this to participate in setting their education and career goals, and to develop the self-advocacy skills they will need in their future.

Community-Based Vocational Training and Paid Employment While in School

Community-based vocational evaluation (e.g., career assessments that identify the interests of the student), job training (including internship opportunities), and especially paid employment opportunities while still in high school have all been shown to improve post-school outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities. It has also been found that communication and self-help skills are associated with early paid work experience for these students. Opportunities for students with significant cognitive disabilities to get paid work experiences similar to students without disabilities (summer and after school jobs) help them build their resumes. Each of these factors is important for IEP teams to consider in preparing students with significant cognitive disabilities to be college and career ready.

Community-Based Instruction

Students with significant cognitive disabilities often have a lot of difficulty taking what they have learned in the classroom and applying that knowledge and those skills to real-life settings. This is called generalization. That is why community-based instruction is an evidenced-based practice for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Community-based instruction (CBI) includes such activities as banking, grocery shopping, using health clubs, mobility training, and using public transportation. CBI involves very carefully planned, individualized instruction. It is designed to help students apply the academic skills they have learned in the classroom to the 'real-world' settings where they will use those skills in adult life. Effective CBI: (1) supports academic instruction, but does not take its place, (2) often includes peers without disabilities as a part of their own learning experiences; (3) is data-based and clearly tied to important student

goals; (4) provides frequent opportunities for “active” student learning (not just passively accompanying others on a CBI outing); and (5) does not remove students from regularly scheduled general education classes.

Inclusion (Integration) in General Education Classes

Participation in general education classes is an evidenced-based practice directly related to positive employment, postsecondary education, and independent living outcomes for students with disabilities. It has been found that students with significant cognitive disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings perform much better on measures of both social and adaptive behavior than similar students in self-contained settings (separate special education classes/schools). Adaptive behavior refers to actions that are necessary for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

Yet, students with significant cognitive disabilities are still primarily educated outside of general education classrooms. In a 15-state survey of teachers in 2013, researchers found that 92% of students with significant cognitive disabilities were served primarily in self-contained classrooms or separate schools with very little opportunity for academic inclusion. It is questionable whether these students are receiving high quality academic instruction on grade-level content if they do not have access to teachers trained in the subject matter (special educators generally do not the same level of this training) and the opportunity to learn alongside students without disabilities.

The NCSC model of curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be used to support meaningful participation in grade-level instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities in general education classes.

Working Collaboratively With Peers and Social Interaction Skills

Research has identified promising strategies for students without disabilities (peers) supporting students with significant cognitive disabilities in general education classes. Social skills and student supports (including peer supports) are evidenced-based predictors for both employment and post-secondary education outcomes. Students with significant cognitive disabilities need the opportunities to interact and develop friendships with peers without disabilities in order to become college and career ready. IEP teams should make sure that students have these opportunities through participation in general education classes, extra-curricular activities (e.g., sports, band, theater, and clubs) and other school events (e.g., dances and football games). Some students may need direct instruction to develop the social skills to take advantage of these opportunities.

Student’s Knowledge of Own Support Needs and How to Access Those Supports

Students who are ‘college ready’ must be able to identify their own needs and use systems of supports. This principle applies to all students, including those students with disabilities participating in alternate assessments. Understanding that supports are both needed and available is the first step (for example, recognizing that transportation may be required to travel to a job). Social interaction and communication skills are also needed in order to successfully use systems of support.

Interagency Transition Collaboration

The importance of interagency collaboration is well documented in achieving positive post-school outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities. In fact, federal law requires

agencies to work together as part of a student's Individualized Transition Planning. An example would be the involvement of the state/local vocational rehabilitation agency with a student's Transition/IEP team. An outstanding resource in interagency collaboration is the Association of University Centers on Disabilities' "A Collaborative Interagency, Interdisciplinary Approach to Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood." This publication can be found at <http://www.aucd.org/template/page.cfm?id=295>.

Role of the Student's Transition/IEP Team in Creating Ongoing Supports and Links with Support Providers to Meet Transition Goals

Students with significant cognitive disabilities often require carefully coordinated and life-long supports to achieve their career, post-secondary education, community, and independent living goals. Federal transition requirements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are important for building toward college and career readiness. However, they do not provide everything that is needed.

Creativity and the use of new models and paths for employment will be necessary for all students to find their way in a world where jobs are hard to find. This may mean creating a job that meets a student's interests, skills, and available opportunities. One way this can be done is through job carving. Job carving is the act of analyzing work duties performed in an existing job and identifying specific tasks that might be assigned to an individual whose skills don't match the full job description. This type of innovation may be particularly useful for students who have significant cognitive disabilities. In addition, person-centered planning is needed to help students and their families identify strengths, gifts, and abilities, as well as creatively develop life opportunities. You can learn more about person-centered planning at <http://www.pacer.org/tatra/resources/personal.asp>. Transition/IEP teams and support providers can play a role in this planning.

College and Career Readiness, High Academic Expectations, and the Role of Alternate Assessments: How Are They All Related?

It is essential to have high expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities and to make sure they are taught challenging academic content. Until now, there has not been a curricular framework based on grade-level content for students with significant disabilities. Therefore, we do not know what is possible yet.

Academic content can directly contribute to a student's quality of life. Challenging academic content does more than prepare a student for college or a career. It can increase a student's knowledge of his or her world, culture, and community. It can also promote lifelong learning and identify interests for hobbies and recreational activities. Well-designed alternate assessments, together with high quality curriculum and instruction aligned to the CCSS, are intended to capture a portion of that academic learning. The elements of such an alternate assessment are discussed in the first part of the paper.

Yet, for students with significant cognitive disabilities, as for all students, college and career readiness is more than a measure on a single test. In the second part of the paper, other essential elements that go beyond the limits of any test were described. IEP teams must ensure that those indicators for post-school success are part of the student's program, while also providing instruction based on high academic expectations. It is this balance that will improve the life outcomes of students with significant cognitive disabilities.