

**NoChild**  
LeftBehind

# LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

FOR YOUR CHILD THROUGH ALTERNATE ASSESSMENTS





# Learning Opportunities for Your Child Through Alternate Assessments

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National Center on Educational Outcomes

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Now I look at the possibilities instead of the limitations.

— Jeanette Forman, teacher





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# Introduction

No one cares more about your child's welfare than you. No one else will be more careful to see that your child is well educated and well treated in school. Now there are efforts underway across the country to help you achieve those goals. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, amended by Congress in 2004, represent some of the federal government's largest investments in public education. Both laws have provisions that focus on improving the quality of teaching for all children, including children with disabilities, and both laws call for high expectations for the academic achievement of all our children.

The purpose of this booklet is to introduce you to the "big ideas" contained in school improvement efforts under *NCLB* and *IDEA*, and to provide you with the information you need to help ensure your child can benefit from these efforts.

At the end of this booklet, you will find some suggested sources of additional information that you can use so that your child benefits from the nationwide education reform and accountability efforts intended to ensure high expectations for all children.



## BIG IDEAS

- 1 High Expectations for All Students
- 2 Measuring Academic Achievement of All Students
- 3 Access to Grade-Level Content
- 4 Making Decisions One Child at a Time
- 5 Counting All Students in School Achievement



# Big Idea 1

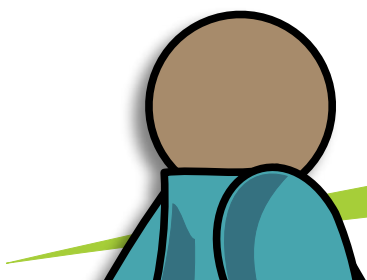
## High Expectations for All Students

The first big idea changing the way schools and parents plan is that all children benefit when schools have high expectations for what each student is expected to know and be able to do. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* very clearly promote high expectations for academic learning and access to the general curriculum for every child. Both laws also require that all children count in school accountability measures so high expectations will result in high achievement for every child.

What are high expectations for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities? And how can we describe high achievement for them? *NCLB* and *IDEA* ask the states to think about these questions in order to describe what the results of good teaching should be for these learners.

Since the early days of special education services, we have learned a lot about how students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can learn and become more independent. For example, we learned in the 1980s that a functional, life skills curriculum allowed students with the most challenging disabilities to participate meaningfully in their home and community life. In the 1990s, we found that inclusion with same age classmates was an effective approach to helping students with the most challenging disabilities make their own life decisions and improve their communication and other social skills.

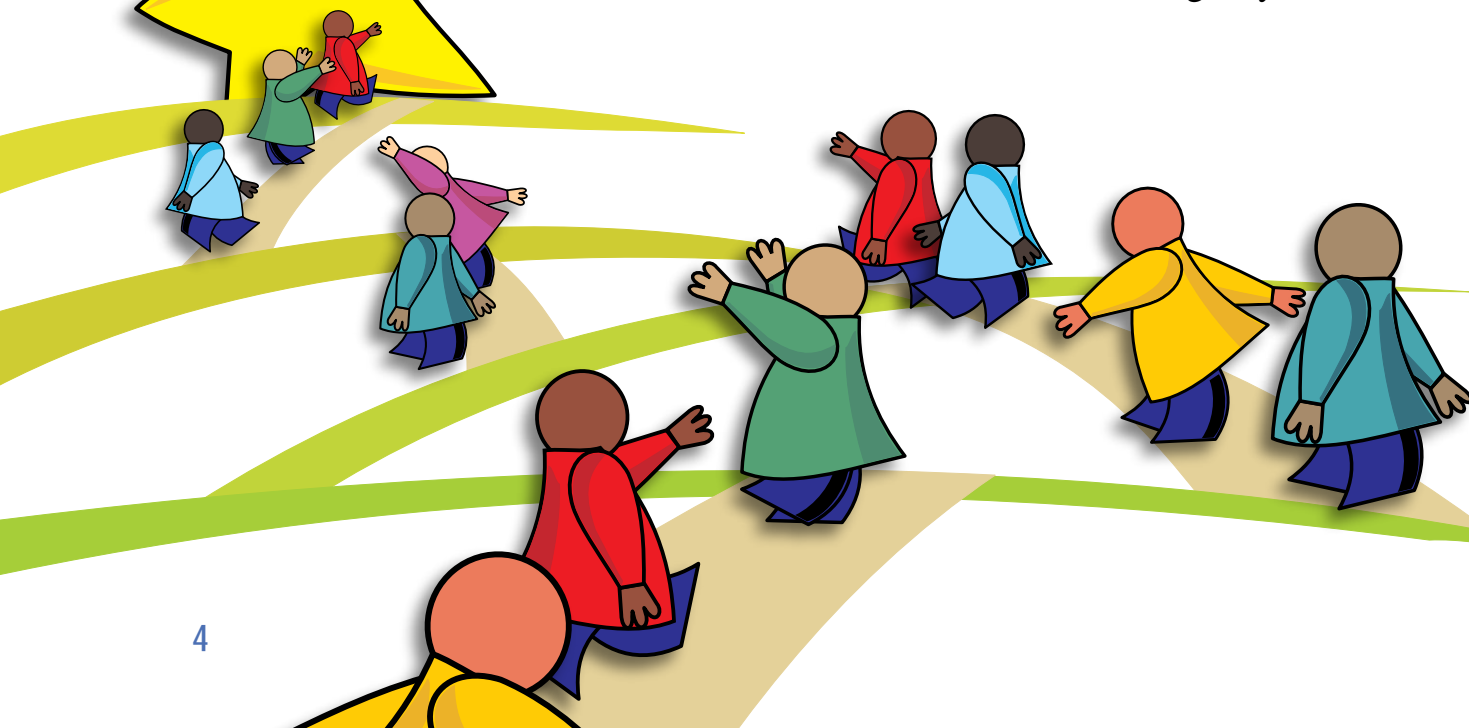
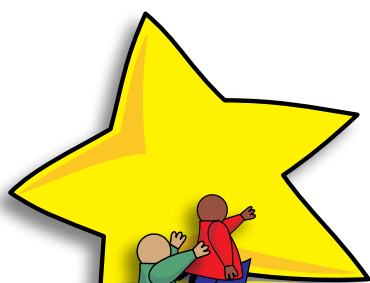
In the past five years, in communities and schools across the country, parents and teachers are again discovering new possibilities. Across the country, we are finding that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can access, and make progress in, the general curriculum.





Today, many students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are included in their enrolled grade classrooms and they are learning academic skills and gaining understanding linked to the same content as their classmates.

As part of the *NCLB* and *IDEA* assessment and accountability requirements, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are participating in a curriculum based on the same academic content standards that all their grade-level peers are learning—content that is age-appropriate, engaging and challenging. Sometimes, they interact with this same content in slightly different ways from their classmates—through assistive technology, pictures, symbols or textures, or through whatever method they use to communicate. They also are showing what they have learned in creative and exciting ways.



# Big Idea 2

## Measuring Academic Achievement of All Students

One of the ways *NCLB* and *IDEA* work to ensure that the best education possible is provided to every student is by holding schools accountable for educational results. Schools must show adequate yearly progress (AYP) in student academic achievement, as determined by the achievement of all students and all student subgroups. One way for parents to think about high expectations and related requirements in *NCLB* and *IDEA* is by thinking of them as a set of action steps for the state:



... [A]cademic opportunities increase my child's life opportunities.

— Mary Calie, parent

### Action Steps



First, as a result of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, states defined ambitious academic standards for what all children must know and do in mathematics, reading and language arts, and science at each grade-level.



Next, state assessments began to measure the achievement of all students in learning the content defined by the academic content standards.



As a result, states decided what level of achievement students must show to be considered proficient in math, reading and language arts, and science. This is the academic achievement standard that shows how well students have been taught.

The tool to measure whether students have been well taught is called a state assessment. Results from state assessments help parents know whether schools have been successful in teaching students the knowledge and skills contained in the state's academic content standards. That is why it is so important to include all students in statewide assessments—so that the public can hold schools accountable for all students' learning.

You and your child's individualized education program (IEP) team will decide which assessment option is

right for your child. IEP teams decide how each student will participate in assessments, not whether students will participate. An alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards is an assessment designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities that will measure achievement separately in reading and language arts, math and science.

These alternate assessments make it possible for your child to show what he or she has learned—and for the school to be held accountable for that achievement.



# Big Idea 3

## Access to Grade-Level Content

Many parents worry about schools assessing their children with the most significant cognitive disabilities. They know that their child may not have access to academic instruction in math and reading (that is, access to the general curriculum). They may wonder if it really is possible for their child to learn reading and math.

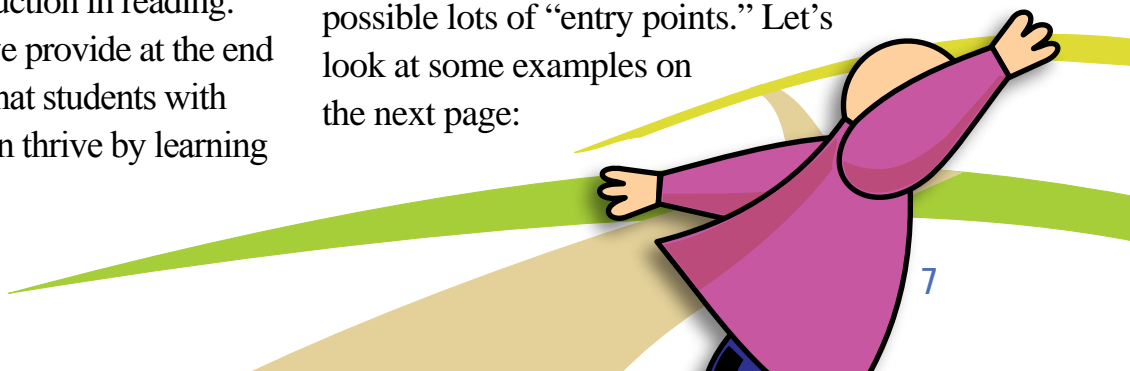
Many children with the most significant cognitive disabilities have IEP goals that are focused on learning life skills. The third big idea contained in *NCLB* and *IDEA* recognizes that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can learn both functional skills and academic skills at the same time. That is, we should not wait to teach a child to read until after they have mastered functional skills. As one researcher put it, “Students who are nondisabled are not expected to master cleaning their rooms or washing their hands before they receive instruction in reading.” Many of the resources we provide at the end of this booklet confirm that students with significant challenges can thrive by learning

academic content while they are learning life skills, just as their typical peers do.

Parents can be assured that experience and research are beginning to show that when the instructional content is clearly linked to reading, math and science standards, high expectations have been set for their child and that their child is taught in the same areas that are going to be assessed.

Just looking at grade-level curriculum can make the task of identifying ways to link your child’s curriculum to grade-level learning standards formidable.

Parents and IEP teams may conclude that some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are unable to achieve grade-level expectations, even with the best instruction. What makes more sense, and is becoming good practice in many states, is to help IEP teams s-t-r-e-t-c-h the grade-level learning standards to make possible lots of “entry points.” Let’s look at some examples on the next page:



## Math Example

**Grade 7 Content Standard—Data Analysis (Statistics):** Students will apply range and measures of central tendency (mean, median and mode) of a given numerical data set.

**How students learn the content:** All seventh-graders are learning the concepts of mean, median and mode. They plot various sets of data, including prices, to illustrate the concepts. Ron is plotting the mode using prices cut from advertisements and then glued on an organizer to create a bar graph.

**Why this is useful:** Looking at information and drawing conclusions from it (data analysis) is an important skill that helps us understand everything from shopping to social trends.

**Combining academic and functional learning:** Ron is learning the concepts of more, equal (“same”), and less in the context of consumer choices. Having access to the same information as other students his age helps him develop appropriate language and provides increased opportunities for interaction and communication.

Another student in Ron's class is learning similar skills and concepts using an adapted keyboard to graph the mode. This activity gives that student an opportunity to practice picture identification and fine motor skills, as well more practice in ways (other than speech) to communicate.





## Reading Example

**Grade 6 Content Standard—Comprehending Literary Text (Elements of Literature):** Students will describe the plots and main parts of grade-level novels (e.g., main events, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution).

### How students learn the content:

Sixth-graders are reading a book about dolphins and using it to learn about plot components. They all use graphic organizers to help them analyze the story. June is working on basic plot components using a graphic organizer that provides visual cues. Her materials also reflect her augmentative communication and text identification systems of photographs and line drawings paired with print.

**Why this is useful:** Learning to sequence events in reading gives students not only an appreciation of literature and a deeper understanding of recreation and leisure activities, but can help generalize sequencing skills. Sequencing is an important skill used in most life activities from self care to scheduling to vocational tasks.

**Combining academic and functional learning:** Besides text comprehension (including word recognition strategies and vocabulary), June is working on sequencing (first then next then last and beginning then middle then end). Having access to the same literature as other students her age gives her increased opportunities for interaction and communication.

Another student is identifying the events in the story using tactile symbols (sand for being alone on the island, fake fur for being hunted by the wild dogs, and a wooden dowel for the mast of the sailboat). This gives him more practice in developing and using a consistent mode of communication in addition to learning about the story and the concepts of beginning then ending and first then last. It also provides opportunities for sensory integration experiences.



What these examples have in common is that they are based on the state academic content standards, and demonstrate ways all children can access the general curriculum. That is the foundation on which your child's alternate assessment must be built.

Your child's progress on IEP goals or an assessment of functional life skills cannot be used as achievement measures under the accountability provisions of *NCLB* and *IDEA*. IEP goals are individual to each child and are developed for the purpose of reporting progress to parents and making decisions about programs and services a child receives.

In addition, IEP goals are often not aligned with state academic content standards. Therefore, it is not possible to use IEP goals to measure whether schools are meeting their goals for AYP, which is the measure of school accountability under *NCLB*. Learning functional skills may be an important component of your child's IEP, but it is also critical that your child have access to the general curriculum and that your child's academic achievement be counted for AYP purposes.

*NCLB*'s accountability provisions go beyond the individual accountability of the IEP to ensure each student's broad learning needs in the general curriculum are supported. For students with disabilities, the system accountability of *NCLB* and *IDEA* adds more accountability—that every school and district must be accountable for the academic learning for all students—including those with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

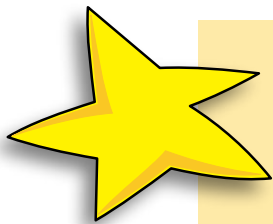


# Big Idea 4

## Making Decisions One Child at a Time

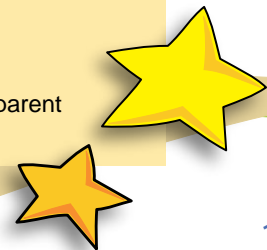
The fourth big idea is making decisions one child at a time. All students with disabilities must be included in statewide and districtwide assessments. The IEP team plays a role in deciding how a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities will take the statewide assessment. The decision should be based on educational needs and parents should be active in this decision process. One way to prepare for making decisions about statewide assessments is to think about the following questions:

- How does your child get access to the general education academic curriculum and the topics that the testing will cover?
- How does your child communicate (for example, with pictures, words or signs)?
- How does your child interact with text (for example, does your child pay attention to a reader, identify pictures, recognize some letters and sounds, match words and use symbols to represent objects, wants or needs or read a short sentence)?
- What kind of supports or modifications does your child use in order to be successful and participate actively in the general academic curriculum? Are those supports and accommodations going to be available for your child?



I found for our daughter that the topics of the 11th-grade curriculum, such as biodiversity and [the American novel], were engaging to her. They provided motivation that reduced the need for prompting.

— Mary Calie, parent



If the parents and their child's IEP team decide that the child will take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, the IEP must contain a statement about why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment, and how the particular alternate assessment selected is appropriate for the child.

Parents should learn more about the methods that will be used to assess their child. The design of alternate assessments varies from state to state. In almost all states, the alternate assessment incorporates the use of pictures, visual cues and objects.

In some states, parents may be asked to give permission for their child to be videotaped or photographed while engaged in schoolwork, and a collection of school work samples as well as video or photographs are gathered over the course of several months. These collections of student work are then evaluated and given a score that indicates the level of achievement. This type of alternate assessment is sometimes called a portfolio assessment or a body of evidence.

In other states, the state prepares a performance assessment for each student's teacher to administer to the student—these assessments are a set of specific tasks that

the student performs over the course of several days. Usually the teacher provides whatever supports and learning tools the student uses in instruction to be sure that the student can give a response in a meaningful way. The teacher scores the tasks and submits them to the state for review.

Still other states may have a checklist of essential skills and knowledge for each grade and content area, sometimes called a rating scale or checklist. Over the course of several months, a teacher gathers information that results in a rating of the student's achievement of these skills and knowledge. Usually evidence of those skills also is kept in the student's file for occasional review by the state or district to be sure the ratings are accurate.

There are many different variations of these types of alternate assessments. Ask your child's teacher or IEP team members to help you become familiar with the type of assessment your child will take.

Parents may also want to think about how much support and prompting may be too much. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may need lots of supports to successfully participate in assessments, but those supports should not prevent the student from demonstrating independent skills and problem solving.

# Big Idea 5

## Counting All Students in School Achievement

Parents are often surprised when they find out that the statewide assessments used to measure the academic progress of all students are designed to give information about their own school's progress in teaching their child and other groups of children.

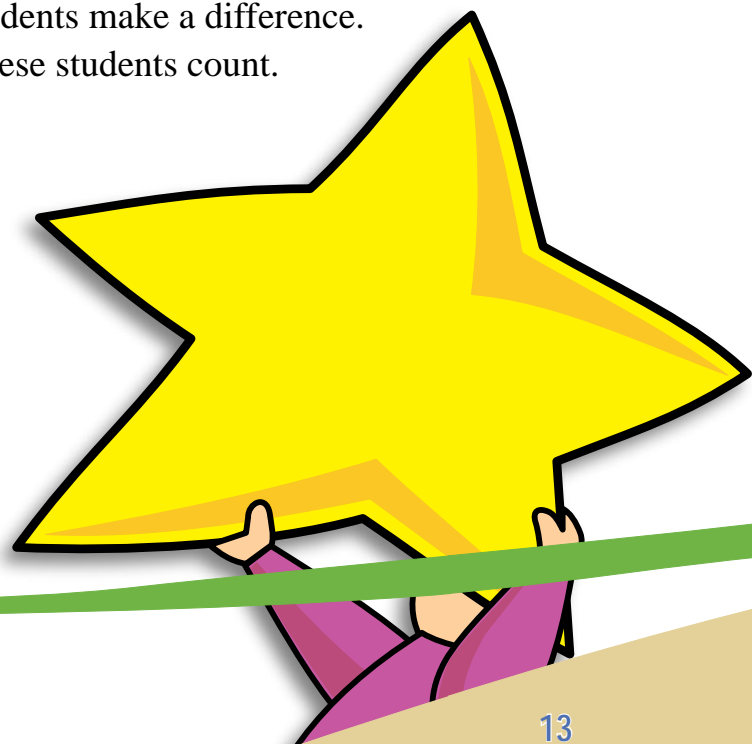
The last big idea is counting all students in school achievement. *NCLB* requires that schools make genuine progress in closing the long-standing achievement gaps between students who are disadvantaged or have disabilities and their classmates. States must show that they are making continuous and substantial improvement and that the accountability system they are using is the same in all their public schools.

In *NCLB*'s accountability provisions, all students count, including all students with disabilities. In many places, schools

have been motivated by the inclusion of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to dramatically improve the instruction that these students receive. The inclusion of these students in school accountability has resulted in new understanding of what all children can achieve when taught well.

It is important for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to be included in statewide assessments and accountability. The scores of these students make a difference.

These students count.





There was always a desire to include all students, but no one ever thought to use curriculum as a means to obtain full inclusion. Now, with inclusive accountability and a restructuring of the academic system in special education, children with the most significant cognitive impairments are contributing to the education system, and more importantly, they are learning.

— Daniel Wiener, educator



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## Helpful Web Sites

### Federal Technical Assistance and Dissemination Resources

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[www.ed.gov/admins/lead/speced/toolkit/faqs.doc](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/speced/toolkit/faqs.doc)

[www.ed.gov/admins/lead/speced/toolkit/idea-nclb.ppt](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/speced/toolkit/idea-nclb.ppt)

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### National Center on Educational Outcomes

<http://education.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/altAssessFAQ.htm>

<http://education.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/altAssessTopic.htm>

### United States Department of Education

[www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/edpicks.jhtml?src=fp](http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/edpicks.jhtml?src=fp)

[www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html](http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/idea2004.html)





Our mission is to ensure equal access to education  
and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation.

[www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)