

## Successfully Transitioning from the AA-MAS to the General Assessment

### Introduction

Federal policy initiatives such as the flexibility waivers for accountability (see box) are requiring that states transition away from the use of an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS). It is expected that those students who had participated in that assessment will instead participate in the state's general assessment (or a Race-to-the-Top consortium assessment if the state belongs to one). It is

important that this transition be successful.

Much has been learned through the development of the AA-MAS and its implementation. These lessons learned form the basis for ensuring the successful transition from the AA-MAS to the general assessment. Indeed, the lessons learned from the AA-MAS provide important information for all states as they strive to ensure that their general assessments are appropriate for a broad range of students.

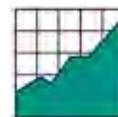
### Benefits and Challenges

Low-performing students with disabilities can successfully learn the grade-level content when they have access to high-quality instruction. The inclusion of students with disabilities in the new more accessible general assessments will promote high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities.

States and districts have an opportunity to think thoughtfully about how to best instruct and assess all students, including low-performing students with disabilities and other struggling learners. The development of an AA-MAS in some states provided the opportunity to learn more

“Because the high-quality assessments that an SEA is developing will better measure the achievement of students with disabilities, the SEA will no longer be able to use alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards. Accordingly, the students with disabilities who may currently be eligible for alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards must be included in the high-quality assessments based on grade-level academic achievement standards that an SEA will administer no later than the 2014-2015 school year.”

*ESEA Flexibility: Frequently Asked Questions (p. 37)*

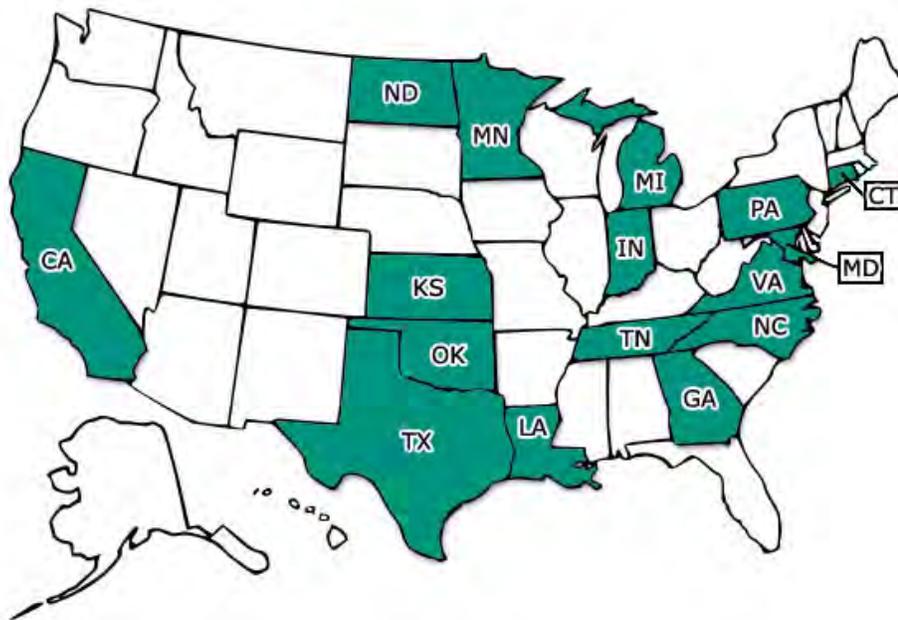


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**Figure 1. States with an Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Achievement Standards**



about the characteristics of this population of students and how they can best demonstrate their knowledge and skills on accountability assessments.

### ► **Suggestions for a Successful Transition**

States should consider the following strategies for moving the students currently participating in the AA-MAS to the general assessment:

#### ► **Look at the data to learn more about the students who are currently participating in the AA-MAS.**

Drill down into the data to learn more about the characteristics of students. In some states students taking the AA-MAS are more likely than the overall

population to be from historically underserved populations (e.g., ethnic or language minority, low socioeconomic background). There is a risk that once the AA-MAS is phased out, this group of students will become invisible. It is important that states and consortia continue to analyze the data to better understand the characteristics of low-performing students, and to see whether their instructional and assessment needs are being met.

#### ► **Develop assessments that incorporate the principles of universal design.**

The principles of universal design address practices and procedures that can improve student access to assessments and ensure that the assessments produce valid results for students with disabilities. Many of these

principles were incorporated into the developed AA-MAS without changing the constructs assessed and should be considered for incorporation into the general assessment.

#### ► **Develop clear participation guidelines that seamlessly include all students in the assessment system.**

As the new assessments are developed, corresponding participation guidelines will need to be developed. Prior to the enactment of the federal regulations that permitted the development of an AA-MAS, some students may have fallen into a “gap” between the general test and the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). It is important that a similar gap does not again occur as new assessment systems are developed. The AA-AAS is designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities, so very few students currently participating in the AA-MAS should be included in the AA-AAS. This means that clear participation guidelines are needed with appropriate criteria that will fold the students who participated in the AA-MAS back into the general assessment.

#### ► **Consider students’ access needs.**

Some students may have difficulties accessing the curriculum. Instructional accommodations and other accessibility tools may be needed to enable students to meaningfully access

rigorous content. Similarly, accommodations and accessibility tools may be needed to help them access the assessment. If some accessibility tools and accommodations used in instruction are not available to students on assessments because they violate the constructs measured, students should practice accessing assessment content without the supports employed during their instruction. Teachers and other educators may need training to make decisions about accessibility tools and accommodations.

► **Ensure that students have access to grade-level content.** Several studies have shown that in some states many students participating in the AA-MAS did not have access to grade-level content. For students to successfully participate in the general assessment it is vital that they have access to rigorous standards-based curriculum.

► **Provide professional development for educators.** Some educators may not have the knowledge and skills needed to successfully instruct low-performing students with disabilities. Training needs include the following topics:

- (1) How to differentiate instruction and provide better access to academic content
- (2) How to write individualized education programs (IEPs) that are aligned to state standards and include measurable goals

(3) How to use formative and other nonsummative assessments to improve instruction

(4) How to select, implement, and evaluate accommodations and test features that are embedded in an online platform

► **Develop systems that support student achievement.**

Supporting student achievement requires a multifaceted approach that includes both school improvement efforts and the development of better assessment systems. For this to occur, states need to work closely with their districts, schools, and other stakeholders to create systems that support the learning and assessment of all students, including low-performing students with disabilities.

► **Summary**

The AA-MAS option may be going away, but there still is a population of struggling learners with disabilities who are challenging to instruct and assess. The proposed rollback of the regulation that allowed this assessment option gives states and districts the opportunity to change practices to bring about real change that will improve student outcomes. As these students are transitioned back to the general assessment, states, districts, and schools have another chance to really think about how to best instruct struggling learners. A well-designed transition plan will help facilitate the successful transition

of students from the AA-MAS to the general assessment.

► **Resources**

*A Principled Approach to Accountability Assessments for Students with Disabilities* (Synthesis Report 70). Thurlow, M. L., Quenemoen, R. F., Lazarus, S. S., Moen, R. E., Johnstone, C. J., Liu, K. K., Christensen, L. L., Albus, D. A., & Altman, J. (2008). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/OnlinePubs/Synthesis70/Synthesis70.pdf>

*ESEA Flexibility*. U.S. Department of Education (2013). Washington DC: Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/index.html>

*ESEA Flexibility: Frequently Asked Questions*. U.S. Department of Education (2012, August 3). Washington, D.C.: Author. <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/esea-flexibility-faqs.doc>

*Leading the Transition from the Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) to the General Assessment*. Lazarus, S. S. & Rieke, R. (2013). *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 26(1). <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/JSELLazarusRieke2013.pdf>

***Lessons Learned in Federally Funded Projects That Can Improve the Instruction and Assessment of Low Performing Students with Disabilities.***

Thurlow, M. L., Lazarus, S. S., & Bechar, S. (Eds.) (2013). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/LessonsLearned.pdf>

***Moving Your Numbers Website with Tools and Resources.***

Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. <http://movingyournumbers.org>

***States' Flexibility Plans for Phasing out the Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Academic Achievement***

***Standards (AA-MAS) by 2014-15*** (Synthesis Report 89). Lazarus, S. S., Thurlow, M. L., & Edwards, L. M. (2013). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/OnlinePubs/Synthesis89/SynthesisReport89.pdf>

## About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). It is affiliated with the Institute on Community Integration at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

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*NCEO Policy Directions* is a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Sheryl Lazarus, Martha Thurlow, Laurene Christensen, and Vitaliy Shyyan. It is available in alternative formats upon request.

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