



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

# *Guidelines for Statewide Accountability Assessments*

**Revised July 2023**

# GUIDELINES FOR STATEWIDE ACCOUNTABILITY ASSESSMENTS

**Revised December 2024**

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Revision to guidance documents occurs based on feedback the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) receives from the local education agencies (LEAs), state stakeholder groups, OSPI's interpretation of law, court cases, and guidance from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). OSPI also revises guidance documents based on on-site and desk monitoring reviews, and formal written complaints.

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams on their authority related to decisions around accountability assessments and to help guide IEP teams in determining the appropriate assessment options for students.

## Accountability Assessment Decisions

Participation in statewide accountability assessments is a critical element of equity and access to education. Recognizing that, federal and state laws require that all students enrolled in public schools participate in statewide:

- on-grade level academic assessments in English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, and science, designed to provide accountability for the effectiveness of instruction in schools; and,
- on-grade level English language proficiency for both knowledge and skills in reading, listening, writing, and speaking for students eligible for English language development (ELD) services.

These accountability assessments occur in grades 3–8 and 10 for ELA and mathematics; grades 5, 8, and 11 for science; and grades K-12 for English language proficiency. Results from these statewide assessments show what students at a particular grade level are expected to know and be able to do, based on the [Washington State K-12 Learning Standards](#)<sup>1</sup>, and for students eligible for ELD services the [Washington English Language Proficiency Standards](#)<sup>2</sup>, in comparison to the knowledge and performance demonstrated by all Washington students.

The [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\), or Public Law 114-95](#), reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. The ESSA's requirements concerning students with disabilities (SWD)<sup>3</sup> include:

- schools are accountable to the public for the educational achievements of all students;
- all students participate in on-grade level assessments in order to meet this expectation of accountability; and
- assessments provide reasonable adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities in order to measure the academic achievement of students in grade level standards.

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 \(IDEA\)](#) articulates requirements related to the assessment of students with disabilities, as well. The IDEA also requires the participation of all students with disabilities in on-grade level state and districtwide assessments. Specific IDEA requirements include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington State K-12 Learning Standards are called the K-12 Learning Standards for the purposes of this document.

<sup>2</sup> The Washington English Language Proficiency Standards are called the ELP Standards for the purposes of this document.

<sup>3</sup> *Students with disabilities (SWD)* are students eligible for special education and related services who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This does not include students eligible for only 504 plan services.

- 1) Students with disabilities are included in general state and districtwide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations, where necessary<sup>4</sup>. The term “individualized education program” or “IEP” means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with this section and that includes...a statement of any individual modifications in the administration of state or districtwide assessments of student achievement that are needed in order for the child to participate in such assessments; and if the IEP team determines that the child will not participate in a particular state or districtwide assessment of student achievement (or part of such an assessment), a statement of (a) why that assessment is not appropriate for the child; and (b) how the child will be assessed (e.g., name of the alternate academic and/or language assessment(s) in which the student will participate).<sup>5</sup>
- 2) The state must ensure that all children with disabilities are included in all general state and districtwide assessment programs, including assessments described under section 1111 of the ESEA, 20 U.S.C. 6311 (i.e., mathematics, reading or language arts, and science, and any other subject determined by the state), with appropriate accommodations and alternate assessments, if necessary, as indicated in their respective IEPs.

Most Washington students receiving special education services will participate in Washington statewide on-grade level assessments of content for ELA, mathematics, science [i.e., [Smarter Balanced, Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science \(WCAS\)](#)], with those who are eligible for English language development services also participating in assessments of English language proficiency [i.e., [WIDA™ ACCESS©](#)]. These assessments have a variety of accessibility tools available to all students, as well as accommodations for those with specific needs. Only approximately 1% of students, those who have the most significant cognitive disabilities, will participate in alternate assessments of academic content and language development, which are based on alternate achievement standards [i.e., [Washington Access to Instruction & Measurement \(WA-AIM\)](#) and [WIDA™ Alternate ACCESS©](#)]. With multiple ways to participate, the question is not whether students receiving special education services will participate in statewide on-grade level assessments, but rather how they will participate.

Plainly speaking, this means that the IEP team must make a decision about three possible assessment options for statewide accountability assessments for grades 3–8 and 10 for ELA and mathematics, and grade 11 for science:

- 1) Participate in the on-grade level statewide assessment without accommodations (i.e., standard administration);
- 2) Participate in the on-grade level statewide assessment with accommodations (i.e., participate with accommodations); or
- 3) Participate in the on-grade level alternate assessment.

## Assessment Participation Decision

The decision about how an eligible student participates in the statewide assessment is an IEP team decision, and *not an administrative decision*. The IEP team decision must be made within the following two parameters:

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<sup>4</sup> [Public Law 108-446, Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act 2004](#), Sec. 612(a)(16)(A).

<sup>5</sup> [ibid.](#) Sec. 614(d)(1)(A)(V-VI)

- 1) The student must be eligible for special education and have an IEP in effect at the time of the decision and during the duration of the assessment.
- 2) IEP team decisions regarding a student's participation in statewide assessments must be made at a scheduled IEP team meeting that precedes administration of the statewide assessment.

At least annually, the student's IEP team meets to review the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), need for specially designed instruction, annual goals, learner characteristics, including how the student's disability(ies) affects his/her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (the same curriculum for nondisabled students<sup>6</sup>). The IEP meeting includes a determination of accommodations necessary to measure that performance on statewide and districtwide assessments or, in rare cases, whether the student's participation in an alternate assessment is necessary and appropriate. **The IEP team does not have the authority to decide whether the student will or will not participate in a statewide or districtwide assessment for accountability.**

## Accommodations

IEP teams should begin the decision-making process about how a student will participate in the general assessment from the position that all students, including all students with disabilities, can learn grade level content with instruction, and should participate in the general assessment system to the maximum extent appropriate to their individual needs. One strategy in testing students with disabilities is the use of accommodations in addition to the standard administration of the test. Accommodations are changes to a test or testing situation that facilitate students' access to test content. Accommodations do not reduce learning expectations but are intended to reduce the effects of the student's disability and "level the playing field" and should remove "barriers" irrelevant to the content actually being assessed.

Accommodations are used widely for the assessment of students who, because of a disability, are deemed unable to participate meaningfully in state assessments under standard testing conditions. To be effective, accommodations must address the unique needs of the students for whom they are provided. The student's IEP must include a statement of individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance on state and district-wide assessments. Accommodations are to be provided during instruction and during the administration of assessments as documented on the student's IEP. Students with Section 504 Plans may also receive accommodations on the state tests. The general guidelines for accommodations for students with Section 504 Plans are identical to those for students with IEPs.

The decisions regarding accommodations for instruction and assessment should be considered during the IEP meeting at the following discussion points:

- Consideration of Special Factors – Special considerations need to be addressed in developing the IEP when considering factors unique to the student including:
  - use of positive behavioral interventions;
  - language needs related to the student's IEP for an English Language (EL) student;
  - the student's need for Braille;

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<sup>6</sup> [WAC 392-172A-03090](#)

- the student’s language and communication modes and needs; and,
- need for assistive technology devices and services.
- Supplementary Aids, Accommodations and Modifications – The IEP team discusses the services, activities, and supports that will be provided in general education classes and other education-related settings, which allow the student to be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
- Statewide and Districtwide Assessments – The IEP team documents the participation of the student in state- and districtwide assessment.
- Assessment Accommodations – The IEP team documents the accommodations that are needed to facilitate the participation of the student in state and districtwide assessment.

Washington’s [Guidelines on Tools, Supports, & Accommodations \(GTSA\) for State Assessments](#) identifies the embedded and non-embedded assessment accessibility features for eligible students that improve the student’s interaction with state assessments. **Tools** are available to all students and can be used at the student's discretion. **Supports** are available to English language learners and any student with a need identified by an educator. **Accommodations** are for students who receive special education or Section 504 plan services with a documented need noted in an IEP or Section 504 plan.

IEP teams and Section 504 plan teams are advised that there may be accommodations required for the teaching and learning of students with IEPs or Section 504 plans that do not apply to state assessments and are not listed in or are not listed as an accommodation in the GTSA. The use of accommodations for instructional purposes is in no way restricted to only the ones indicated in the GTSA. IEP teams and Section 504 plan teams are required to identify and ensure provision of all accommodations necessary to the individual student for instruction through the IEP meeting and Section 504 planning processes.

Section 504 Plan: The decisions regarding accommodations for instruction and assessment can occur during the Section 504 planning meeting. Information regarding [Section 504 plan development](#).

The GTSA accessibility features have been approved by OSPI. The Guide provides information for classroom teachers, English development educators, special education teachers, and related services personnel to use in selecting and administering universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations for the content assessments of English language arts/literacy, mathematics, and science, as well as the state’s English language proficiency assessment. If a student's IEP or Section 504 plan documents the need for an accommodation that is not addressed within the GTSA, the student's IEP or Section 504 plan team may have their school district personnel (e.g., District Assessment Coordinator) submit a Non-Standard Accommodation Request form. The Non-standard Accommodation Request is now available in the Assessment Reporting Management System (ARMS). Contact your District Assessment Coordinator for more information.

## Alternate Assessment

The alternate assessment is a statewide testing option available only for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The term “significant cognitive disabilities” does not represent a new or



separate category of disability. It is a designation applied for approximately 1% of students with disabilities participating in the statewide testing program.

**Students with significant cognitive disabilities means those students who require intensive or extensive levels of direct support that is not of a temporary or transient nature. Students with significant cognitive disabilities also require specially designed instruction to acquire, maintain or generalize skills in multiple settings in order to successfully transfer skills to natural settings including the home, school, workplace, and community. In addition, these students score at least two (2) standard deviations below the mean on standardized, norm-referenced assessments for adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning.**

Washington has two alternate assessments. The WA-AIM is a performance task assessment aligned to the K-12 Learning Standards in ELA, mathematics, and science. The WIDA Alternate ACCESS is the English language proficiency assessment that is designed to test those English learners in grades K to 12 with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot meaningfully participate in the [WIDA™ ACCESS © \(WIDA™\)](#) with accommodations.<sup>7</sup>

Alternate assessments are intended for students who, even with appropriate accommodations, are unable to access the Smarter Balanced ELA and mathematics tests, and the WCAS. Students meeting criteria shall take the WA-AIM in all content areas required for the student's enrolled grade level. The decision that a student needs to participate in an alternate assessment would occur for approximately 1% of the **total tested population**. For example, if the total tested population in a school district were 4,000, then 40 students would represent 1% of the total tested population.

## Alternate Assessment Participation Descriptors

For a student to be considered as having a significant cognitive disability and therefore, appropriate for consideration as a candidate for an alternate assessment a student must:

- The student must have a documented cognitive disability that affects intellectual potential. For the purposes of statewide assessment, students with significant cognitive disabilities refers to the population eligible to participate in the alternate assessment; it is not a new or separate category of disability.
- The student requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature.
- The student uses substantially adapted materials or individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings, including school, workplace, community and home.
- The student scores at least two (2) standard deviations below the mean on standardized norm-referenced assessments for adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning.

Students participating in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS must also be an English learner as determined by the [state identification procedures](#).

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<sup>7</sup> Kindergarten English learners who are eligible for an alternate assessment participate in the first grade WIDA Alternate ACCESS test. Kindergarten cut scores are established independent of the first grade expectations.

There are other issues that may affect a student’s educational experience and his/her ability to learn and show what he/she knows that are not appropriate to consider during the decision-making process for the alternate assessment. **The following criteria may not be used for alternate assessment participation decisions:**

- poor attendance, excessive or extended absences
- disability related to visual or auditory disabilities, emotional-behavioral disabilities, specific learning disabilities, or speech and language impairment
- lack of access to quality instruction in core standards
- social, cultural, linguistic, or economic differences for the WA-AIM; however cultural and linguistic differences should not be used as sole exclusionary factors for eligibility to participate in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS
- below average reading or achievement levels
- displays of behaviors or emotional distress during testing
- expectations of poor performance, non-proficiency, or the pre-determined or anticipated impact of the student’s performance on the school/district on-grade level assessment scores
- an administrative decision
- the student’s disability category, educational placement, type of instruction, and/or amount of time receiving special education services.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 on the following pages outline the participation criteria and decision-making process for the WA-AIM and WIDA Alternate ACCESS. There is a difference in terms of participation criteria between Figure 1 (WA-AIM) and Figure 2 (WIDA). The difference is in the list of exclusionary factors in the boxes at the bottom of page for both charts. The main purposes for these lists of exclusionary criteria are to: (1) raise the probability that a student truly has a significant cognitive disability and (2) ensure that students are not inappropriately included or excluded from receiving an appropriate education and/or participating in the appropriate statewide assessment.

Figure 1 for the WA-AIM shows that “linguistic” and “culture” are two factors an IEP team may not use as the primary basis for a student participating in the WA-AIM, but Figure 2 for the WIDA Alternate ACCESS does not include either of these as exclusionary factors. **“Culture” and “linguistic” factors include, but are not limited to,** recent immigration from another country; education disrupted during an immigration experience; acculturation experiences in the United States; cultural values which are distinctly different from those of the majority culture; bilingual/bicultural background of the family; and the influence of language and dialect on school performance.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities often have one or both of these factors that may **contribute** to academic and learning difficulties; however, the IEP team must rule out these factors as the **primary** cause of a student’s academic and learning difficulties to determine whether the student is eligible to participate in the WA-AIM. The fundamental principle underlying this rule is that a student should not be regarded as having a significant cognitive disability if (1) he or she has not been given sufficient and appropriate learning opportunities or (2) the student’s academic struggles are primarily due to factors other than a disability such as language or culture. This same “rule” does not apply to the WIDA Alternate ACCESS because:

- in order to participate in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS, the student must first be a student with a significant cognitive disability and eligible to participate in the WA-AIM (IEP team will need to use professional judgment for students in grades K–2), and
- the WIDA Alternate ACCESS is a test to assess the language proficiency of an EL with a significant cognitive disability; consequently, the student’s native language or culture should not exclude the student from participation in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS.

Figure 3 shows the sequence of decisions made by IEP teams when determining whether a student should participate in alternate assessment. **If a student meets the guidelines to receive instruction on alternate academic or language achievement standards and takes alternate assessments based upon those alternate achievement standards, then all tested academic content, language, or other state-mandated assessments areas required for the student’s enrolled grade level, should be alternate assessments.**

Finally, when an IEP team determines that the student should take an alternate assessment, the team must document in the IEP<sup>8</sup>:

- 1) why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment, and
- 2) why the alternate assessment selected (i.e., WA-AIM and WIDA Alternate ACCESS) is appropriate to assess the student’s academic, or language if eligible, performance.
- 3) A description of benchmarks or short-term objectives for ELA and math, (if present in the IEP) in the IEPs pertaining to the assessed grades: 3–8 and Grade 10.

## Setting High Expectations

One of the best ways schools and families can help students with disabilities to prepare for their future is to set high expectations and standards, while keeping the student’s individual needs in mind. Current research shows that expectations play an important role in shaping the academic achievement of students, regardless of the presence of disability, the nature of the student’s disability, or their levels of functioning. All other factors considered equal, youth with disabilities whose families expect them to go on to post-secondary education after high school will often achieve more in high school than students whose families do not share that same expectation. Expectations also play an important role in assessment decisions. The purpose of the state accountability assessments is to give a snapshot of the systems (state, district, and school) our students are being educated in. It is important students are identified to take the right assessment in order to report results that are accurate and actionable to make system improvements. Furthermore, most students with disabilities, given the opportunity and appropriate supports and services, have the ability to access the regular statewide accountability assessment.

## Summary

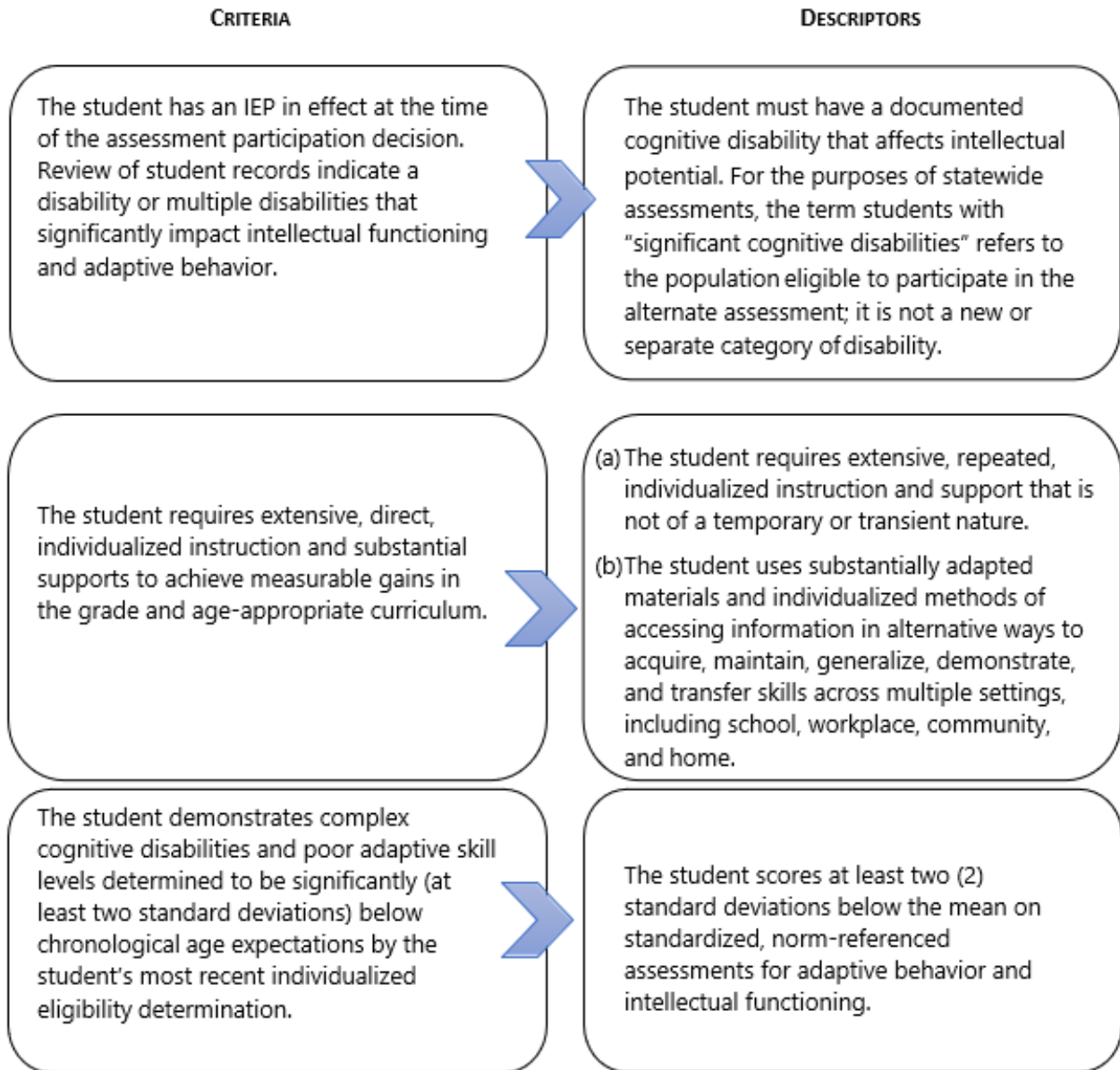
To ensure that all children are held to high expectations and to meet the 95% assessment rate outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act, all students should participate in the statewide assessment system. Like all IEP team decisions, the decision about whether or not the student will participate in the general on-grade level assessment with or without accommodations, or in the alternate assessment, must be carefully considered. Data and preferred practice suggest that an alternate assessment is necessary and appropriate for approximately 1% of the total student

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<sup>8</sup> WAC 392-172-03090

population being tested in the required grades. While the IEP team is ultimately responsible for determining the most appropriate assessment option for a student, these guidelines present some of the questions and considerations IEP team members must contemplate in their statewide assessment decision-making process. Utilizing these guidelines will help to ensure that the required measures of student progress are relevant, meaningful, and accurately depict the student's accomplishments and needs for continued growth and development. These guidelines may also be used for IEP team decisions regarding any districtwide assessments.

**Figure 1. Guidelines for Participation in the WA-AIM Alternate Assessment**



The determination for how a student participates in accountability and graduation assessments is **NOT** based on: (a) poor attendance, excessive or extended absences, (b) lack of access to quality instruction, (c) social, cultural, linguistic, or economic differences, (d) below average reading or achievement levels, (e) expectations of poor performance, (f) the anticipated impact of the student's performance on the school/district performance scores, and (g) the student's disability category, educational placement, type of instruction, and/or amount of time receiving special education services.

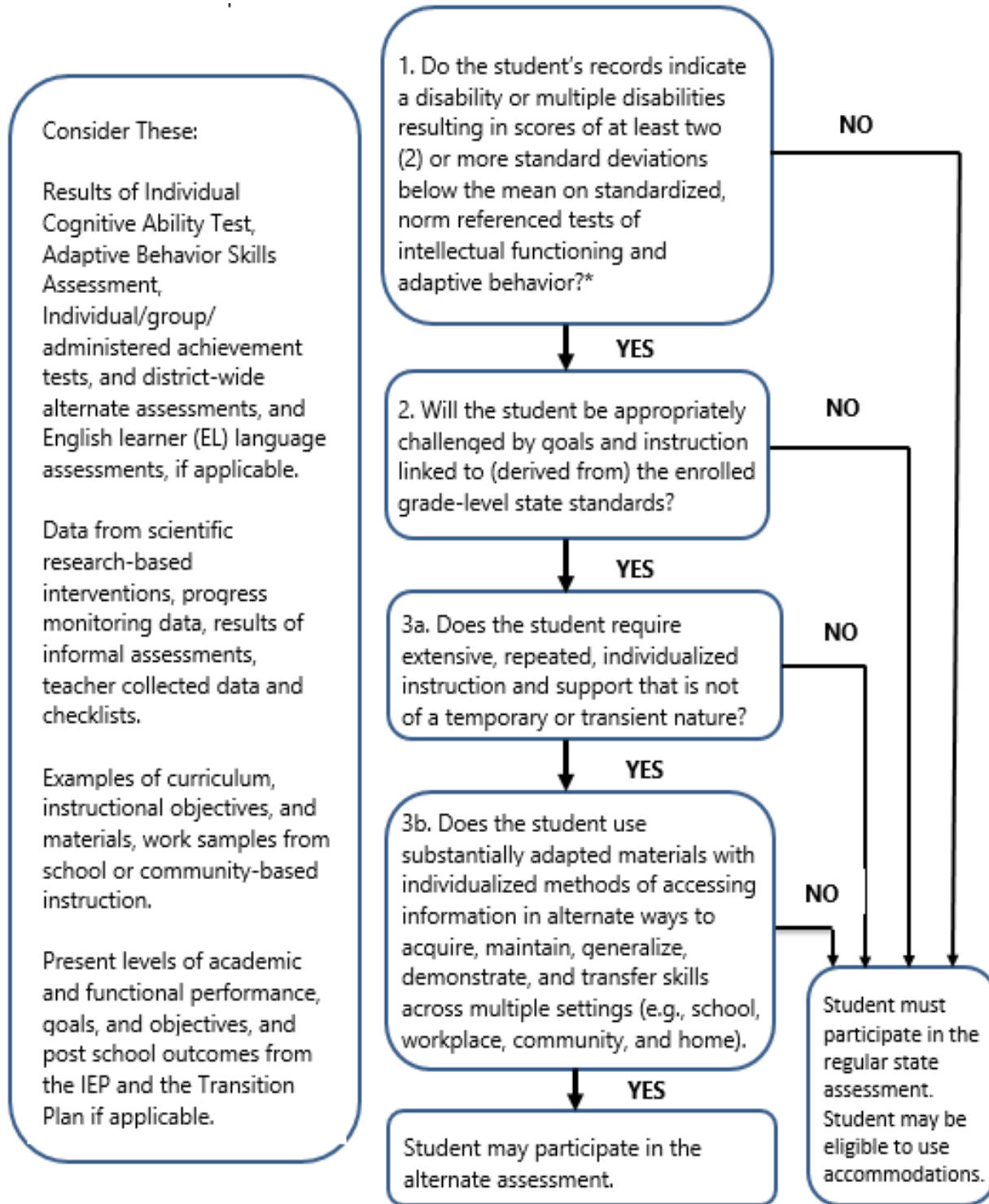
**Figure 2. Guidelines for Participating in the WIDA™ Alternate ACCESS®**

*The IEP team may decide that a student's knowledge can best be assessed with the alternate assessment if the student meets all the following criteria:*

Criteria	Descriptors
Student is identified as an English learner.	The student has been identified as an English learner through following the <a href="#">state identification procedures</a> .
The student has an IEP in effect at the time of the assessment participation decision. Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.	The student must have a documented cognitive disability that affects intellectual potential. For the purposes of state assessments, the term "significant cognitive disability" is a designation used to refer to the population eligible to participate in the alternate assessment; it is not a new or separate category of disability.
The student requires extensive, direct, individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade and age-appropriate curriculum.	(a) The student requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction, and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature. (b) The student uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings, including school, workplace, community, and home.
The student demonstrates complex cognitive disabilities and poor adaptive skill levels determined to be significantly (at least two standard deviations) below chronological age expectations by the student's most recent individualized eligibility determination.	The student scores at least two (2) standard deviations below the mean on standardized, norm-referenced assessments for adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning.

The determination for how a student participates in language proficiency assessments is **NOT** based on: (a) poor attendance, excessive or extended absences, (b) lack of access to quality instruction, (c) social or economic differences, (d) below average reading or achievement levels, (e) expectations of poor performance, (f) the anticipated impact of the student's performance on the school/district performance scores, and (g) the student's disability category, educational placement, type of instruction, and/or amount of time receiving special education services. All students who take the alternate English language proficiency assessment must be English learners and meet the eligibility criteria for the Alternate ACCESS assessment.

**Figure 3. Alternate Assessment Participation Decision Flowchart**



## Resources

**Timelines and Calendar for Assessments** – The OSPI website is updated regularly to reflect the most accurate information and testing requirements, testing availability and test windows.

**OSPI Graduation in Washington Toolkits** – Graduation Toolkits are a resource to help educators and families understand state graduation requirements. School districts should ensure all key personnel are aware of the toolkits.

### **Questions and Answers on Report Cards and Transcripts For Students with Disabilities**

**Attending Public Elementary and Secondary Schools** - In October 2008, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) released guidance regarding questions related to report cards and transcripts. Please refer to the [Office of Civil Rights](#) website.

**State Board of Education (SBE) Graduation Requirements and Resources** – The SBE is responsible for setting graduation requirements. This website provides information on graduation requirements and multiple resources related to graduation.

**Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) High School Progress and Outcomes** – Established in 2012, the Washington Student Achievement Council provides strategic planning, oversight, and advocacy to support increased student success and higher levels of educational attainment in Washington. The website provides information on cumulative graduation rate change, high school graduation rates over time, and other pathways to high school attainment (i.e., diplomas from community colleges and alternative credentials)



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