Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities:
FAQ for Schools

1. *What is the purpose of state assessments?*
   The purpose of state assessments is to provide opportunities for students to show what they know and can do, aligned to grade-level standards. State assessments are part of an accountability system that aims to improve outcomes for students. As such, state assessments also fulfill federal assessment requirements.

2. *What is the purpose of the MSAA?*
   The Multi-State Alternate Assessment (MSAA) is a comprehensive assessment system designed to promote increasingly higher academic outcomes for students with significant cognitive disabilities in preparation for a broader array of postsecondary outcomes. Click on the link to ADE's College and Career Preparedness document to learn more about creating higher expectations for students with significant cognitive disabilities to achieve a fulfilled life beyond high school.

   The test assesses academic skills that will be useful when accessing post-school options in various settings in students' community, college, or career. Additionally, it is an opportunity for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to show what they know and can do, aligned to grade-level standards.

3. *What is the MSAA not intended to do?*
   The MSAA should not be used as isolated data in making placement or other educational decisions for students. The MSAA is not designed to inform teacher evaluations or educator or school merit-based incentives. The MSAA does not provide information on student performance in life skills. Although not an intended purpose of the MSAA, some teachers have shared that the test administration provides anecdotal information on student behaviors and engagement.

4. *Where can I see sample items?*
   Sample items are available to everyone without needing to log into the platform. Visit the MSAA Sample Items web page and scroll down to sample items by grade and content area. These sample items are presented in the same way as the operational test.

5. *What does test administration look like?*

   The MSAA is administered online using a computer, tablet, interactive white board, or other electronic device. Test administrators give the test to one student at a time. Scripted directions provide standardization to test administration. MSAA partners have developed a best practice video that shows what a standard administration looks like. Additional videos address administering the student response check for students who may not have a consistent mode of communication and the administration of the writing prompts. These videos are on the MSAA sample items page, which can be accessed without logging into the MSAA system.

6. *What are the student characteristics of those who take the MSAA?*

   First and foremost, eligible students must have a significant cognitive disability (mild, moderate, or severe intellectual disability), must be learning content linked to or derived from state content standards, and must require significant and extensive direct and individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in grade-level and age-appropriate curriculum.

   - Most students: use symbolic language, understand language independently or with cues, use oral speech, initiate and respond to social interactions, read basic words, conduct basic mathematical computations, and count with correspondence.
   - Some students: use intentional communication without a command for symbolic language, have an awareness of printed text, rote count, and apply mathematical computations.
   - Few students: use cries or facial expressions to communicate, use augmentative communication systems, alert others without engaging in social interactions, and have no awareness of printed text or numbers.

7. *What are the criteria for participation in alternate assessments?*

   Students are determined to be eligible for alternate assessments by the IEP team, using the Alternate Assessment Eligibility Criteria.

   ADE does not identify specific cutoff scores on academic, cognitive, and adaptive behavior tests for eligibility determination, to allow for the varying strengths and needs of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Rather, alternate assessment eligibility determination is a holistic approach that incorporates cognitive, academic, and adaptive scores; modified grade level curriculum; and documentation of intense, direct, individualized instruction to make measurable gains. The MSAA was designed for approximately 1% of students who have significant cognitive disabilities. When determining eligibility, IEP teams should consider what evidence demonstrates the most significant cognitive disabilities. LEAs may not add criteria for participation, nor should participation determination be made based on percent

participation in alternate assessments, educational placement, or administrator determination. All IEP team members must understand eligibility requirements, including parents. It is the LEA's responsibility to prepare parents for participation in IEP meetings. It is also recommended that school and district administrators be aware of eligibility criteria.

8. *When should eligibility be determined?*
   Alternate assessment eligibility is determined by the IEP team annually. Once the IEP team determines that a student is eligible for alternate assessments, this decision is reevaluated each year, based on the student's current needs and progression in academic skills. IEP teams must have eligibility discussions starting in kindergarten for English learners and grade 2 for non-English learners. Eligibility should also be determined for students in all grades if a local assessment is administered to all students. Therefore, alternate assessment participation is needed to explain why a student's skills are assessed in other ways rather than taking district-required formative and end-of-course assessments. Remember that it is a federal requirement under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to provide an alternate assessment for all assessments required for students at the Local Education Agency (LEA).

   Note: The deadline for determining eligibility for alternate assessment participation each school year is November 30. This deadline allows for suitable instructional time before test administration. An IEP team determining eligibility after the deadline is considering alternate assessment participation for the following school year.

9. *What supports are available for students during test administration?*
   In addition to embedded supports applied during the creation of the standards and developing the items themselves, several supports are built into the platform. Students may use a variety of platform features such as increasing or decreasing the size of the item, color contrast, and line reader. The assessment can be administered on a laptop, tablet, or an interactive white board. Students may also use non-platform features such as object replacement, tactile graphics, and having the test administrator read the items to the student. Students may use the forms of communication they use during instruction. Test administrators can encourage the student with verbal praise, reinforcement, and other motivation that does not provide input on student performance on the assessment.

   Accommodations are available as well. Allowable accommodations include assistive technology, paper test administration, sign language, scribe, and braille cards for foundational reading items in Grades 3 and 4. IEP teams select, and document accommodations annually based on student needs.

10. *How can teachers incorporate grade-level standards into instruction?*

Before MSAA, the National Center and State Collaborative developed resources to support teachers and classrooms. Included in these resources are Core Content Connectors (CCCs), which are aligned to the standards and provide "entry points" into the standards. They are grouped by content areas and grades. Element cards provide resources for teachers aligned to the CCCs, similar to a recipe. The Mathematics Activities for Scripted Systematic Instruction (MASSIs) and Language Activities for Scripted Systematic Instruction (LASSIs) are actual lessons that have been task-analyzed (step by step), and the Unit Lesson provides supports for lessons that may be taught in a general education classroom. The focus of this unit is universal design for learning. Additionally, there are Formative Assessment Guides that teachers can use to develop their own formative assessments and a *Parent Overview Guide* with information about what their child might be learning in the current and next grade for ELA and Mathematics.

ADE's MSAA web page: Under the Resources tab, Arizona Academic Standards linking documents

MSAA Resources for Educators, including formative assessment guides

ADE Assessment's Parents and Students web page: Under the MSAA Parent Resources (Parent Guides)

11. *What implications does participation in the MSAA have on graduation?*

Graduation does not depend on state assessment participation. Instead, graduation is based on coursework aligned to standards, including Core Content Connectors. Districts/Charters may have other policies in place for graduation requirements.

12. *What MSAA reports are available?*

Four types of reports are available.

- Individual Student Reports are sent to parents/guardians and placed in the students' permanent school file. These reports contain a letter to parents/guardians, scale scores, proficiency levels and proficiency level descriptors, skills to work on at the next grade level (or continue to work on for high school), and guiding questions for parent-teacher discussion.
- School and District Roster Reports include a summary of all performance levels and scale scores at that school or district. Student performance is compared with state averages.
- School and District Summary Reports include a summary of student participation and performance as well as performance level distributions at the school or district.

- School and District Student Results File is a spreadsheet containing all testing information, including demographic information, accommodations used, learner characteristics inventory, participation status, scale scores, and performance levels.

MSAA is an academic assessment based on grade-level content standards. The MSAA results do not include information on life skills or other non-academic content.

13. *What is the relationship between alternate assessment participation and least restrictive environment?*

Alternate assessment participation determination is not based on the student's placement, nor should participation determine the student's least restrictive environment. However, placement options, both general education and special education settings, could help the IEP teams to provide evidence for the student's needs when determining eligibility.

ADE has created a parent friendly [Frequently Asked Questions](#) version of this document that addresses alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. This document should be shared with parents.