



Alternate assessments for special education students in the Southwest Region states



Institute of Education Sciences
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Summary

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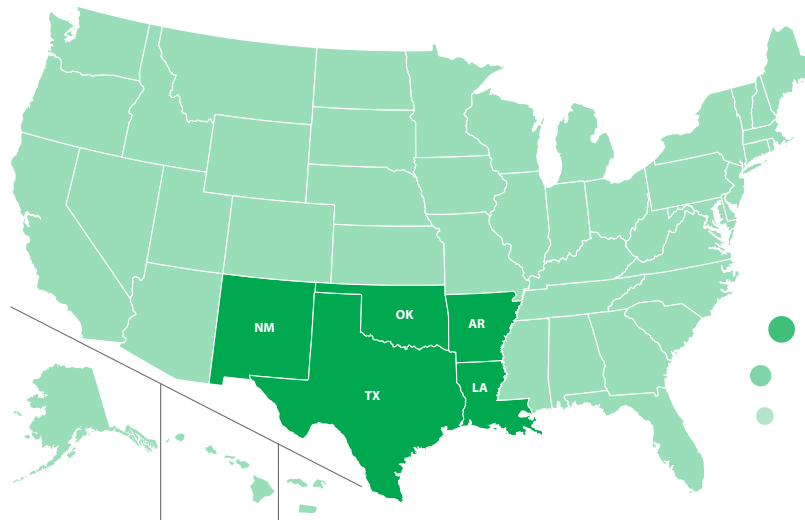
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Alternate assessments for special education students in the Southwest Region states

In 2003 the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations allowing states to develop alternate standards and assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This study reviews and summarizes alternate assessment policies and practices—and their implementation and impact—for the most significantly cognitively disabled students, across the five states in the Southwest Region.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was the first federal act to require including all students in state and district accountability systems. In 2003 the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations allowing states to develop alternate assessment standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities—and to include some results from these assessments in annual school, district, and state accountability formulas as long as the number of such inclusions did not exceed 1 percent of the combined population of students taking general and alternate assessments statewide (U.S. Department of Education, 2003b). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 and U.S. Department of Education (2006b) regulations issued in August 2006 further clarified the requirements for assessing students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. One important

change was that states now needed to link alternate assessment standards to general education standards.

Many states are struggling to identify alternate content standards, to find curricula that address these standards while meeting student needs, to locate teachers who can implement the curricula, and to ensure that alternate standards are demonstrably linked to general education standards in accordance with expectations set by the No Child Left Behind Act. Most also face great challenges developing and implementing reliable and valid alternate assessments that can be implemented efficiently and comparably across the state.

The survey and interviews conducted for this study suggest that the Southwest Region states have been tracking changes in their curricular and assessment focus from functional to academic content. State representatives believe that changes in policies and practices have improved each state's approach and emphasis, though they admit a need for more rigorous analysis of these relationships.

For 2007/08 four of the five Southwest Region states will have instituted alternate portfolio assessments (based on work samples) or performance assessments (based on exemplars of proficient performance) for students with

significant cognitive disabilities. Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas have transitioned dramatically. Louisiana has changed from a checklist to a multiple-choice measure. New Mexico has switched from a checklist based wholly on functional achievement to performance-based tasks that are linked to alternate achievement standards. Texas has created alternate achievement standards based on state general content standards and is transitioning from local choice in testing to a uniform state-developed portfolio system with a checklist.

Given the range of the student cognitive and physical disabilities that definitions cover, a one-size alternate assessment will not fit all.

The wide range of skills and tasks targeted by alternate assessments creates challenges for comparability and for determinations of across-the-board technical adequacy. Much work is needed to establish alternate assessments that reflect adequate psychometric properties, instructional relevance, validity, reliability, and usability. The Southwest Region states share many of the same needs. Each, however, has its own unique histories, values, populations, approaches, resources, and constraints—which must be taken into account in any attempt to address a particular state’s requirements or to study them further.

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