



# Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about the Connecticut Alternate Assessment System

Regulations for Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states to make available to eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities an alternate assessment designed to measure their knowledge and skills (34 CFR §§ 200.1(d) and 300.160 (c)). Connecticut’s alternate assessment system for students with significant cognitive disabilities is composed of the following:

- Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) Skills Checklist Science for eligible students in Grades 5 and 8;
- Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) Skills Checklist Science for eligible students in Grade 10; and
- Connecticut Alternate Assessment (CTAA) for English language arts/literacy and mathematics, developed with the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) for eligible students in Grades 3-8 and 11.

This document serves as a Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) resource for frequently asked questions (FAQ) related to the Alternate Assessment System and implications of state and federal legislation including the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This FAQ document will be updated to add new questions and answers as important issues arise, or amended as new information is clarified.

This FAQ document is intended to provide local education agencies (LEAs), parents, advocacy organizations and other interested parties with information regarding the federal requirements for serving Connecticut’s children with significant cognitive disabilities participating in alternate assessments. This document represents the current understanding of the CSDE on this topic. This guidance does not impose any additional requirements beyond those required under applicable law and regulations.

## 1. What does “significant cognitive disabilities” mean?

**Answer:** Students with significant cognitive disabilities are a relatively small population who: (1) are identified with one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (for example: intellectually disabled, autism, multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury, which are the most common); and (2) have cognitive impairments which may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with systematic instruction and accommodations.

Additionally, student records indicate a pervasive disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life. Intellectual functioning is not defined solely by an I.Q. score.

## 2. Why is it necessary to confirm that the student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade- and age-appropriate curricula?

**Answer:** Unlike the standard assessments which provide for greater access in a subject area, the CTAA and CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science are designed for the student who: (a) requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature; and (b) uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings. Access to content across subject areas is provided in a systematic manner allowing these students greater opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.

### 3. Why does Connecticut need alternate assessments?

**Answer:** Alternate assessments are designed to measure the knowledge and skills of students with significant cognitive disabilities as required by the IDEA, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and ESSA. The CTAA is aligned to the same Connecticut Core Standards (CCS) used to instruct and assess all of Connecticut's public school students in English language arts/literacy and mathematics.

The Connecticut Science Curriculum Framework (CSCF) is addressed in Grades 5 and 8 with the CMT Skills Checklist Science for eligible students, and in Grade 10 the CAPT Skills Checklist Science is used for students participating in the alternate assessment. Alternate assessments are designed to support student independence to the greatest extent possible by making academic content accessible and the expected achievement levels appropriate.

### 4. What is the Connecticut Alternate Assessment?

**Answer:** The CTAA is an assessment of English language arts/literacy and mathematics aligned to the CCS for eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 3-8 and 11. It is a secure test accessed via an online platform during the CSDE's determined testing window. Teachers administering any alternate assessment must be trained by the CSDE to administer the assessment to each student individually. Accessibility features and accommodations are available based on the needs of each student.

### 5. What is the CMT or CAPT Skills Checklist Science?

**Answer:** The CMT Skills Checklist Science is for eligible students in Grades 5 and 8, and the CAPT Skills Checklist Science in Grade 10. These alternate assessments are non-secure and administered to students by a teacher trained by the CSDE to administer the assessment to each student. The teacher creates activities representing the Science curriculum content and assesses the student throughout most of the school year.

### 6. Why is it necessary to confirm that the student is learning content linked to and derived from the CCS and CSCF?

**Answer:** Connecticut public school students are expected to be provided instruction aligned to the CCS and the CSCF. The federal office of special education and rehabilitative services (OSERS) November 16, 2015, [Dear Colleague letter](#) provides specific guidance regarding the development of the individualized education program (IEP) linked to standards. The CTAA assesses grade-level content linked to and derived from the CCS which are the academic standards for English language arts/literacy and mathematics expected for all Connecticut students. IEP goals and objectives should be based upon the general education curriculum defined in the CCS for all Connecticut students. The CTAA has been developed to ensure that all eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to the grade-level CCS.

Similarly, eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 5, 8 and 10 are assessed in Science using the CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science which is aligned to the grade-level CSCF allowing students to access the content, and demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level Science standards.

### 7. During the planning and placement team (PPT) meeting, the team shared evidence and answered "No" to one of the three questions establishing eligibility for the Alternate Assessments on the [CTAA and CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science Eligibility & Learner Characteristics Inventory \(LCI\)](#), why is this student no longer eligible for the Alternate Assessment?

**Answer:** Connecticut's Alternate Assessment System is designed to measure the knowledge and skills of eligible students with significant cognitive disabilities based on the CCS or CSCF established for all

Connecticut public school students. Eligible students require extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support, that is not of a temporary or transient nature and use substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings.

Eligible students participating in the alternate assessments represent a relatively small group of students who, due to their disability cannot meaningfully participate in standard assessments (Smarter Balanced, Connecticut SAT School Day, CMT Science or CAPT Science) even when provided accommodations. The CSDE continues to monitor the characteristics of students participating in the alternate assessments in accordance with federal guidance. Only these students, meeting all three criteria should be participating in the CTAA or CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science. Students who do not meet all three criteria for eligibility would be expected to participate in the standard assessment, typically with designated supports and/or accommodations.

#### **8. Why is it important to identify the most appropriate primary disability category?**

**Answer:** The CSDE continues to monitor assessment participation as required by federal regulations. Although there is no federal restriction on the primary disability for participation in an alternate assessment, certain disabilities by their nature would encourage greater justification for participation. The identification of the disability category alone is not sufficient justification for participation in the Alternate Assessments. For example, the selection of alternate assessments for students with the primary disability of a specific learning disability (SLD) may be inappropriate. A student with an SLD may be most appropriate for the standard assessment with accommodations to support their needs in the more challenging subject areas. The selection of alternate assessments for a student with a primary disability of Intellectual Disability (ID) may be inappropriate because a student may also be able to appropriately access the Smarter Balanced assessments through the use of accommodations.

#### **9. How is the most appropriate assessment selected?**

**Answer:** Best practice is for the assessment decision to be made by a comprehensive team, such as the PPT, comprised of those directly involved with the student, who are also knowledgeable of the age-appropriate grade-level curriculum, and with specific expertise regarding the student's strengths and areas of concern. High expectations should guide the process. Teams should initiate discussions as if the student would participate in the standard assessment defining how the student will access the content of the assessment using designated supports and accommodations as needed.

If after the standard assessment has been explored, evidence is shared defining the needs and characteristics of the student and their access to grade-level curriculum which meets all three components of the eligibility criteria for the alternate assessments; the PPT may develop the student's IEP and select the appropriate alternate assessment indicated on page 9 of the IEP document.

#### **10. Why is communication competency so important for students, especially those with significant cognitive disabilities?**

**Answer:** In order to teach and determine if a student understands the content presented, the student needs to be able to communicate in a manner that may be understood by another individual. The alternate assessment system is designed to provide access to the assessment using a student's preferred mode of communication allowing them to demonstrate what they know and can do related to grade-level standards. The alternate assessments provide opportunities for the use of assistive technology, expressive and receptive communication supports, and accommodations included in the student's IEP that are consistent with Connecticut assessment policies.

The CSDE recognizes the importance of communication in instruction and assessment and supports the NCSC definition of communication competency as the ability to use a communication system that enables students to gain and demonstrate knowledge. Communication competency, prior to the third grade is the foundation the CSDE strives toward. It is a priority for students to establish communicative competency to reliably access curriculum, receive content related information from others, and to consistently demonstrate their skills ultimately improving post school outcomes.

**11. Why are there questions on the [CTAA and CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science Eligibility & LCI about expressive communication/Augmentative Alternative Communication \(AAC\)](#)?**

**Answer:** Communication pervades all aspects of education (\*Calculator, 2009). Many children with disabilities may not be able to communicate using the traditional spoken and written modalities. Evidence suggests that up to forty percent of students who take an alternate assessment may require AAC support (\*\*NCSC, 2013). The AAC support or devices may include, but are not limited to sign language, communication boards, vocal output communication systems and assistive listening devices, including FM systems. The CSDE continues to support greater understanding of assistive technology and AAC particularly for students with significant cognitive disabilities to improve access to the general education curriculum and assessments. [Review Connecticut's Resource Guide for Assistive Technology](#).

\*Calculator, S. (2009). Augmentative and alternative communication and inclusive education for students with the most significant disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13, 93-113.

\*\*[NCSC's Commitment to Communicative Competence \(2014\)](#). Retrieved November 17, 2016.

**12. How is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) included in the Alternate Assessments?**

**Answer:** Alternate assessments are designed with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The entire CTAA test, including passages, items, and response options, are read to the student by the trained test administrator or the embedded text-to-speech accessibility feature. Additional built-in supports include reduced passage length in reading; pictures and graphics included to help students understand test content; models in reading, writing, and mathematics; and common geometric shapes and smaller numbers on the mathematics test. The CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist Science provides guidance for trained teachers to create meaningful content specific activities using the preferred communication methods of the student, to rate how the student demonstrates what they know and can do related to Science.

**13. Where can I find more information about the Alternate Assessment system?**

**Answer:** The following links provide more specific information related to the CTAA System:

[CSDE Student Assessment webpage](#);

[CSDE Special Populations webpage](#);

[CSDE Alternate Assessment System webpage](#); and

[CSDE Comprehensive Assessment Program Portal Alternate Assessments](#).