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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

NCSC ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT ON ALTERNATE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS (AA-AAS)

- 1. *What is an AA-AAS?*** The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) allows states to develop an alternate assessment on alternate academic achievement standards, also referred to as an AA-AAS, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in order to measure student academic performance. An AA-AAS is required to be based on grade level content, but there are different expectations for achievement with respect to that content than there are for students who are not taking an AA-AAS.
- 2. *What is NCSC?*** The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is a consortium of 24 states and five national organizations. NCSC was awarded a grant to develop a new AA-AAS for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. You can read more about NCSC partner states and organizations at <http://www.ncscpartners.org/about>. The NCSC AA-AAS will be based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS.)
- 3. *What are the CCSS?*** In 2010, the National Governor’s Association and the Council for Chief State School Officers released detailed descriptions of what students are expected to be able to learn and do for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. These standards are called the CCSS and have been adopted by almost every state. CCSS focus on the 21st century knowledge and skills that students need to be college and career-ready after high school. Students taking the NCSC AA-AAS will primarily focus on content targets connected to the CCSS called Core Content Connectors.
- 4. *What are Core Content Connectors (CCCs)?*** CCCs are the starting points for planning instruction and assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Instruction based on the CCCs will ensure that students get the “big ideas” from the grade level content that they need to deepen their understanding in later grades. CCCs are content targets that are connected to the pathway of knowledge and skills in a subject area that students typically follow as they move through the grades (Learning Progressions), as well as to the CCSS.

5. What does “College and Career Ready” mean for students with significant cognitive disabilities? The NCSC definition of college and career readiness includes community readiness. The academic instruction designed for college and career readiness will have value for every student because it will promote improvements in communication, math and reading performance, independent and team work skills, chronological age-expected social skills and skills for identifying and requesting needed supports. Increasing numbers of students are going to college programs for students with intellectual disabilities (taking credit or non-credit courses), getting long-term paid employment and living fulfilled lives in their communities. Every student should have the opportunity to work towards these goals.

6. Who decides whether a student takes the NCSC AA-AAS? The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes the parents or guardians, will use established guidelines to determine, on an individual basis, whether a student will participate in this assessment.

7. When will states start using the NCSC AA-AAS? Students will take this assessment for the first time, in most NCSC states, during the 2014-15 school year.

8. Which grades and subjects will be assessed? There will be a NCSC AA-AAS in mathematics and one in ELA, which includes both reading and writing, for grades 3-8 and 11.

9. What is the format of the AA-AAS? There will be approximately 30 items on the assessment for each subject. These 30 items will cover approximately 10 CCCs. Most of the assessment items ask the student to select the correct response (e.g. multiple choice). However, there are some that require the student to construct a response in order to assess certain skills (e.g. “writing” skills). These answers can be constructed in many ways, including through the use of picture symbols or written responses developed with graphic organizers, dictating a response, and use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and Assistive Technology devices.

10. How long will it take for students to complete the assessment? Expected testing time is approximately 1.5 – 2 hours for each assessment (mathematics and ELA), if no breaks are taken. Within the period of days in which the assessment must be completed, the assessment can be paused and resumed multiple times, depending on the needs of the students.

11. What happens if a student has significant medical needs or is clearly expressing distress? It is important to be cautious about administering assessments to certain students with significant medical needs or those who are clearly expressing distress. However, these situations are rare and there will be established policies and criteria for handling them.

12. How will technology be used? The assessment will be administered using technology in a variety of ways, depending on the needs of individual students. Some students will use the online testing program directly on the computer, with the test administrator monitoring their work. For other students, their test administrator may print out testing materials, administer the items, and enter student responses into the computer.

13. How will the NCSC AA-AAS assess the full range of students who take the assessment? There will be test questions at each of four complexity levels. Research shows that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can perform within these levels when they have had an appropriate opportunity to learn the content. NCSC is dedicated to providing professional development to teachers so that they can provide instruction for all students who will participate in the assessment. In addition, a system of curriculum and instructional resources has been created that includes sample lessons and other materials to support teachers. NCSC is also committed to helping educators understand how to develop a communication system for students who currently do not have an effective way to communicate their knowledge and skills. The assessment will also have built-in supports to provide students with the opportunity to respond independently. Finally, there will be careful development and review of test questions to ensure that the items do not create unnecessary barriers for students because of the nature of their disability (e.g. asking a child who is blind to describe a visual image)

14. What happens if a student does not have a consistent method to communicate? Communication at some level is possible and identifiable for all students regardless of functional “level,” and is the starting point for developing communicative competence. Communicative competence is the basis for learning and necessary for active community participation. It is essential that school staff work with families and students to develop a meaningful communication system for students to use daily across settings. Communication needs must be addressed during the IEP process to ensure routine use of the communication system during instruction and assessment. There will likely be a few, rare situations where, despite appropriate interventions, a student still does not have an effective communication system with which to provide responses during the assessment. There will be a policy to address whether the assessment can be stopped if the student is unable to respond. The policy will also address how data about stopped assessments will be collected and evaluated.

15. How will students be matched to assessment items that have the appropriate level of challenge? The level of complexity of the assessment items and the length of the assessment will be determined for individual students using prescreening tools provided by NCSC. There may be assessment items from various complexity levels on a student’s assessment. Also, current design plans involve using performance information from an initial test session to determine the level of complexity of a later session. In the first years that the new assessment is used, many, if not most, students will likely answer questions and do tasks that are less complex. Over time, especially with instruction based on the

resources provided by NCSC, it is expected that most students will demonstrate success on increasingly complex questions and tasks.

16. *How closely aligned are the items on the assessment to the grade level CCSS?*

Most of the items (about 75%) are closely linked to the grade-level content and allow demonstration of skills and knowledge at a broad range of academic complexity. Some of the items (about 25%) are a farther link to the grade-level content, and are designed to allow students who are just beginning to work with the academic content to show what they know and can do at a lower complexity level.