



WHO ARE STUDENTS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES?

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

The Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment System is a new assessment designed to more validly measure what students with significant cognitive disabilities know and can do. This video will introduce you to the population of students who take the alternate assessment: students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

This training is one in a series of training videos that will support teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities in their efforts to teach and assess. Sponsored by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education programs, this training is part of the professional development program of the Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment Consortium.

Let's begin by addressing the question, "What does it mean to have the most significant cognitive disabilities?"

As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities have a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Adaptive behaviors are essential to live independently and to function safely in daily life. When adaptive behaviors are significantly impacted it means that the individual is unlikely to develop the skills to live independently and function safely in daily life. In other words, significant cognitive disabilities impact students in and out of the classroom and across life domains not just in academic domains.

In addition to having a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, students who take the alternate assessment are learning content based on grade level alternate achievement standards. In Dynamic Learning Maps, students are learning content described in Essential Elements that are specific statements of the content and skills that are linked to the Common Core State Standards grade level specific expectations. The Essential Elements are intended to provide links between the Common Core State Standards and grade specific expectations. The Essential Elements are examples of the type of alternate achievement standards that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are learning.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities differ markedly from one another. Many are able to read independently with fluency and comprehension, and write for a variety of purposes.

Others struggle to learn basic academic concepts or process the world around them.

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Still others have not developed intentional communication and depend completely on others to meet all of their needs.

Individual states set eligibility criteria that helps establish which students are eligible to take the alternate assessment; however, most states include descriptions that clearly state that students who take the alternate assessment require extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support; and they use substantially adapted and modified materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternate ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across settings.

Whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability cannot be determined based upon the student's disability category or label, the type of services received, the setting in which the student is educated, or the percent of time receiving special education. These 4 factors do not define whether a student has a significant cognitive disability and do not define eligibility for the alternate assessment. These factors are greatly influenced by local norms, expectations, and resources and do not tell us enough about the individual student to be useful in making decisions about cognitive functioning or participation in the alternate assessment.

There are other factors that cannot be used to determine whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability or should take the alternate assessment. For example, teams must take great care to insure that their decisions are not influenced by a student's language, social, cultural or economic differences. The fact that a student has had extended absences or poor attendance cannot be a factor in determining whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability or should take the alternate assessment. Finally, low achievement in reading or mathematics cannot be determining factors.

When determining whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability or should take the alternate assessment, we must carefully consider the intellectual and adaptive functioning of the student. Participation in the alternate assessment cannot result from an administrator decision, the impact of the student's scores on school or school system accountability indices, the expectation that the student will perform poorly on the general assessment, the expectation that the student will display disruptive behaviors or that the student will endure emotional distress. Ultimately, the only factors that can be used to determine whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability or should take the alternate assessment are: (1) the student's intellectual and adaptive functioning; and (2) the fact that the student is learning content based on alternate grade level standards or essential elements.

Let's look at some students who have significant cognitive disabilities and complete the alternate assessment. Kirsten is an excellent first example because her post-school outcomes are fantastic. Kirsten helps all of us remember that having a significant cognitive disability and taking the alternate assessment do not preclude academic achievement and positive school outcomes. Kirsten has a primary diagnosis of autism, is a talented singer, and was unable to use speech to meet her face-to-face communication needs until she was a teenager. At that time, Kirsten's speech-language pathologist discovered that Kirsten had more success with language

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when it was written down. For example, Kirsten did not appear to understand simple directions when they were spoken, but when the same directions were written down, she could read and follow them. Kirsten's hearing was fine, but she found it very difficult to process spoken language. This insight was the first step toward the development of strong literacy skills, learning to use speech to meet her face-to-face communication needs, and developing work skills that allowed Kirsten to transition to meaningful, paid employment when she exited from school at 21. For 7 years Kirsten required extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and supports, but the effort paid off. Kirsten is an important reminder that having a significant cognitive disability doesn't mean that a student cannot achieve important learning and life outcomes.

This is Steven. He has multiple disabilities. He has no formal means of communication, but Steven is able to indicate personal preferences. For example, his team knows that bluegrass music is top on his list. He smiles broadly as soon the first note of bluegrass plays. Steven tolerates most country, but he moans and groans whenever someone plays anything else. Steven requires extensive supports to meet all of his daily living needs, and he continues to struggle to access assistive technologies. He can turn his head to activate a switch that plays a prerecorded single message, but he cannot coordinate the timing that is required to use that switch to scan and select options. Recently, his team introduced a second switch and two-switch step scanning. Their new occupational therapist explained that adding the second switch eliminates the timing demands required to use a single switch for scanning. Now, Steven is learning to use the switch by his head to step through a series of choices and his 2nd switch to select the desired choice when he hears it. The teams hopes that eliminating the timing demands will make it possible for Steven to work toward a more formal means of communication and provide him with broader access to technologies. In the meantime, they continue to work to develop a means of indicating yes/no, as well as early understandings that symbols can be used to communicate.

Marcus is a serious technology user. In this picture, he is using his augmentative communication device to talk with a teacher about a book they've read together. In addition to his augmentative communication device, Marcus uses communication software on a tablet device and is the king of surfing the net looking for information about trains. Marcus is a train buff! He can read words and understands beginning level texts – especially when it is about trains. He is an excellent speller and uses his spelling skills to communicate single words when he cannot find the symbols he needs on his augmentative communication device. Marcus requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and supports. He spends more than 80% of the day with his peers in a general education 4th grade classroom, but he is learning content based on the alternate standards in his state. Marcus' mother is a serious advocate and an active member of his educational team. She regularly adapts the texts that are being used in the 4th grade classroom down to a primer level so that Marcus can read them independently and improve his core literacy skills while accessing the content his peers are learning. His special education teacher takes the lead in creating all of the modifications for mathematics since Marcus is still working on basic concepts that align with the 4th grade content his classmates are learning.

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James is also a technology user. His team spent the first three years of his school career figuring out how to position him in his wheelchair, where to mount the switch he uses to access the computer, determining that the scanning delay should be set to 2.5 seconds between items, and building a comprehensive, symbol-based augmentative communication system that allows him to interact with peers and adults. James has multiple disabilities that significantly impact his intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, yet he is easily engaged and never misses a conversation within earshot. Despite the extensive, repeated, and individualized instruction and supports James receives, James has not mastered basic mathematics concepts and cannot read text independently. His success in learning to use his symbol-based communication system leaves his team convinced that James could and should learn to read and understand mathematics one day, but his progress to date has been limited.

Hunter has multiple disabilities. Historically it has been very challenging to engage Hunter in learning activities. He has had some success learning to make simple requests using picture symbols, but he does not yet have a formal communication system. In recent years, Hunter's teacher has placed an emphasis on interactive, shared reading and writing with Hunter and his classmates. Hunter is interested and engaged during these interactions like he has never been before. He uses a single message voice output device to comment during shared reading, and he selects letters for writing by indicating yes or no as his teacher shows him and names each letter in sequence. Hunter is not yet reading and writing in conventional ways, but these reading and writing activities provide an important context for engaging Hunter as a learner so that one day he may develop a formal means of communicating, reading, and writing.

Kirsten, Steven, Marcus, James and Hunter represent the range of students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the alternate assessment. Like other student with significant cognitive disabilities, they have interesting profiles of strengths and weaknesses, and each of them is capable of learning and making progress over time. Yet, each requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support; and each uses substantially adapted and modified materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternate ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across settings. Furthermore, each has a disability or multiple disability that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. While many students who are eligible to participate in the alternate assessment can meet many of their own personal care needs, use speech to communicate effectively across communication partners and contexts, and make progress in academic domains, many others struggle with all of these things. The Dynamic Learning Maps alternate assessment system will meet the needs of each of these students.

To learn more about the Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment Consortium and the Alternate Assessment System, please go to www.dynamiclearningmaps.org

Thank you for your participation.