



Eligibility Requirements and Decision-Making Tool for Minnesota Alternate Assessments

This document aims to help IEP teams determine the most appropriate assessment option for a student with a significant cognitive disability. [Test administration resources](#), including examples of test materials, are available to help with the decision-making process as needed.

All students are expected to take [standards-based accountability assessments](#). The purpose of these assessments is to measure student learning of the Minnesota Academic Standards in reading, mathematics, and science. The current reauthorizations of both the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (ESEA) and the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) require that students with disabilities participate in statewide assessment systems designed to hold schools accountable for the academic performance of all students.

Under ESEA, there is no limit on the number of students in a school or district that may be eligible to participate in an alternate assessment. It is important that districts identify the most appropriate assessment for each student.

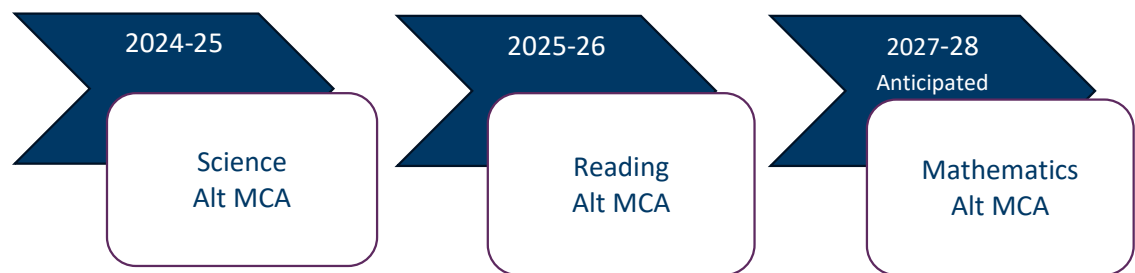
Minnesota's alternate assessments are aligned to extended grade-level Minnesota Academic Standards, which are reduced in breadth, depth, and complexity. Extended standards for assessed content areas can be found in the [Alternate MCA Test Specifications](#).

Most students in Minnesota take the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs), but some students may be eligible to take an alternate assessment in place of the MCA. The United States Department of Education (ED) recognizes that there is a very small number of children with the most significant cognitive disabilities whose performance must be measured against alternate academic achievement standards, as permitted in federal regulations.¹ The term “alternate assessment” will be used throughout this document to represent these assessments.

Over the next few years, MDE will replace the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills with the Alternate MCA (Alt MCA), a redesigned alternate assessment that is aligned to updated academic standards. The first operational school year of each subject's Alt MCA is displayed below.

¹ [OSERS Policy Guidance on Free Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\)](#) (PDF; <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/idea/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/guidance-on-fape-11-17-2015.pdf>)

Alternate MCA (Alt MCA) Release Timeline



Students take one test per subject in the grades shown below. When a student takes a test in a grade shown below, that student’s assessment is aligned to grade-level academic standards (ex. The 5th grade Alt MCA Science assessment will evaluate a student’s understanding of content outlined by the 5th grade extended Minnesota Academic Standards in science).

Alternate MCA (Alt MCA) Tests Available by Grade and Subject

	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Reading	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Mathematics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Science			✓			✓	Once in grades 9-12			

Since the Science assessment in high school covers the grades 9–12 Minnesota Academic Standards in life science, the IEP team should determine the most appropriate year for a high school student to take that assessment. While some students with significant cognitive disabilities may not be enrolled in a course called life science or biology, all students should have access to the general education curriculum, which includes life science instruction. Each district determines which coursework, curriculum and teaching methods will cover the standards in life science, and the high school Science assessment is administered during the year that instruction is completed.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team Determination of the Appropriate Assessment

The IEP team is responsible for making annual decisions about student participation in statewide assessments. These decisions must be documented in the student’s IEP. Caregivers, including parents/guardians and other family members on the IEP team, must participate in the decision. This includes providing the information in an understandable



and uniform format, and to the extent possible, written in a language that parents can understand.

The IEP team must ensure that the student has access to the general education curriculum, which means the student has opportunities to actively engage in learning the content and skills of the general education curriculum. For students participating in a Minnesota alternate assessment, instruction should be linked to grade-level Minnesota academic standards. However, it is likely that the general education curriculum will be substantially simplified for this group of students.

The careful use of this document will help IEP teams ensure that alternate assessment participation decisions are **not** made based on the following factors:

- Student’s disability category as defined by Minnesota Rules, part 3525.1325–1348²
- Educational environment or instructional setting
- Participation in a separate, specialized curriculum
- An expectation that the student will receive a low score on the MCA
- Language, social, cultural, or economic differences
- Concern for participation rate calculations at the district level (under 0.5 percent or over 1.0 percent)

Each state is required to develop a definition for “a student with the most significant cognitive disability” in accordance with federal regulations. This term has been used in [non-regulatory guidance](#) to describe students “whose cognitive impairments may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction”.³ Students may require highly individualized supports that build on each student’s strengths, interests and abilities to improve their progress measured by standards reduced in depth, breadth and complexity.

An IEP team may consider an alternate assessment to be appropriate for a student with a significant cognitive disability if all the following requirements have been met:

- ☐ **Confirm that a student meets all criteria of Minnesota’s State Definition of Most Significant Cognitive Disability.**
 - a. The IEP team determines that a student is significantly below the average cognitive functioning of typically developing peers by:
 - i. using a standardized norm-referenced measure of cognitive functioning, or
 - ii. when formal cognitive assessments are inappropriate, invalid, or documented in other ways, other data-based measures, as referenced in IDEA, may be used to document functioning significantly below age expectations.

² [Minn. R. 3525.1325–1348 \(2007\)](#)

³ Alternate Achievement Standards for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Non-Regulatory Guidance
Archive Information: This guidance has been formally rescinded by ED and remains available on the web for historical purposes only.

- b. The student's significantly below average cognitive functioning has a substantial impact on their ability to function in multiple environments, including home, school, and community.
- c. The student requires intensive and specialized instruction and supports to acquire, maintain, and generalize academic and life skills to actively participate in school, work, home, and community environments.

☐ **Establish that the MCA is not an appropriate measure.**

- a. The IEP team reviewed which [universal supports and accommodations](#) are available to students when taking the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), and this general assessment was determined to not be an appropriate measure of the student's knowledge and skills on grade-level content standards (even when the student is provided allowable and appropriate accommodations). This decision was documented in the IEP including the reasons the MCA is not an appropriate measure.

Decision-Making Process for Minnesota Alternate Assessments

Participation decisions should be made separately for reading, math, and science.

