



Eligibility Guidance and Decision-Making Support for the WIDA Alternate ACCESS in Minnesota

This document provides guidance to support decision-making for participation in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS, Minnesota's alternate [English language proficiency accountability assessment \(ELPAA\)](#). It is intended for use by Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams, in collaboration with English learner (EL) teachers, to determine whether a student identified as an EL should participate in the WIDA ACCESS or WIDA Alternate ACCESS.

All students identified as EL are expected to participate in English language proficiency accountability assessments each year. These assessments measure progress in acquiring English in the domains of Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing. Under the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#) and the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), students with disabilities must participate in statewide assessment systems designed to hold schools accountable for the academic performance of all students. In Minnesota, most students identified as EL take the WIDA ACCESS. For a small number of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, the WIDA Alternate ACCESS may be a more appropriate measure of English language proficiency.

The decision to administer the WIDA Alternate ACCESS must be based on individualized consideration of the student's educational needs. Although this decision is often made at the same time as the decision for alternate academic assessments (for example, the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills [MTAS] or Alternate Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment [Alt MCA]), participation in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS must be determined separately.

WIDA Alternate ACCESS

WIDA Alternate ACCESS is available for students in grades K-12 and is offered in the same four domains as WIDA ACCESS. The assessment is intended for students who:

- Are identified as EL using Minnesota's [standardized EL entrance procedures](#),
- Have a most significant cognitive disability, as defined by the state, and
- Cannot meaningfully participate in WIDA ACCESS, even with allowable accommodations.

WIDA Alternate ACCESS measures English language proficiency using tasks and supports designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Proficiency is described using the [WIDA Alternate Proficiency Level Descriptors](#) (PLDs), which are an extension of the PLDs found in the [WIDA English Language Development \(ELD\) Standards, 2020 Edition](#), and describe the continuum of language development for ELs with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

WIDA provides guidance to support participation decisions, including the [WIDA Alternate ACCESS Participation Decision Tree](#) and [sample test items](#).

Eligibility Requirements

A student may be considered for participation in the WIDA Alternate ACCESS if the IEP team, in collaboration with EL staff, determines the student meets **all** of the following criteria:

☐ **The student is identified as an English learner.**

The student must meet Minnesota's EL entrance criteria, including screening with the WIDA Screener, WIDA Screener for Kindergarten, or WIDA Alternate Screener. The student must be reported as EL in student enrollment data submitted to MDE ([MARSS/Ed-Fi](#)).

☐ **The student has a most significant cognitive disability.**

The student must meet [Minnesota's definition of a student with the most significant cognitive disability](#), which is the same definition used to determine eligibility for alternate academic assessments.

A student with the most significant cognitive disability is one who:

- Is significantly below the average cognitive functioning of typically developing peers, as determined by:
 - A standardized, norm-referenced measure of cognitive functioning, or
 - Other data-based measures, as referenced in IDEA, when formal cognitive assessments are not appropriate, valid, or available.
- Has cognitive functioning that substantially impacts their ability to function in multiple environments, including home, school, and community.
- 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 settings. Note: For students identified as English learners, this extends to English language development instruction.

☐ **The student cannot meaningfully participate in the WIDA ACCESS, even with allowable accommodations.**

If the student is unable to access or respond to WIDA ACCESS tasks, even with accommodations, then WIDA Alternate ACCESS may be appropriate. This decision must be based on:

- Direct instructional and assessment evidence,
- Understanding of the student's accessibility needs and communication mode, and
- Consideration of all available [accessibility and accommodations options for WIDA ACCESS](#).

Inappropriate Criteria

Participation in WIDA Alternate ACCESS must **not** be based on:

- The student's disability category alone
- The student's placement or instructional setting

- The student's language background, or other social, cultural, or economic factors
- Limited prior instruction or [SLIFE \(students with limited or interrupted formal education\)](#) status
- An expectation that the student will receive a low score on WIDA ACCESS
- A desire to simplify test administration (for example, for behavioral concerns or anticipated emotional distress)

Note: For students in grades 3-12, participation in the MTAS or Alt MCA is required for WIDA Alternate ACCESS eligibility. However, the decision to take the WIDA Alternate ACCESS should not be automatic; each assessment serves a different purpose and must be considered independently.

Collaborative and Individualized Decision-Making

Decisions about participation in WIDA Alternate ACCESS must be made annually by the student's IEP team, in collaboration with EL staff. The decision must be based on individualized consideration of the student's strengths and needs, not assumptions based on disability labels, placement, or prior test scores.

IEP teams must include caregivers in this decision, and discussions must be conducted in a format that is understandable to families, including interpretation or translation as needed. This ensures families are informed and engaged participants, as required under IDEA.

The IEP must include:

- Whether the student will take the WIDA ACCESS or WIDA Alternate ACCESS
- If WIDA Alternate ACCESS is selected, a clear explanation of why the WIDA ACCESS is not appropriate, even with accommodations.

For a visual representation of this process, see the decision-making flowchart for WIDA Alternate ACCESS in Appendix A.

Special Considerations for Grades K-2

Determining participation in WIDA Alternate ACCESS for students in grades K-2 requires extra caution. At this early developmental stage, language development, cognitive functioning, and accessibility needs may change rapidly. IEP teams, in collaboration with EL staff, should carefully assess whether the student's needs reflect a most significant cognitive disability, and whether the student can engage meaningfully with WIDA ACCESS with allowable accommodations.

Teams should consider that early elementary students may:

- Have limited expressive language that is developmental rather than disability-related
- Be new to EL services, with limited exposure to instruction in English
- Receive temporary speech/language services
- Not yet demonstrate a clear or complete profile of their Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)

Given the fluidity of development in early elementary years, annual review is essential. Teams should carefully reassess participation based on updated assessments, observations, and instructional data. See Appendix B for guiding questions and Appendix C for example scenarios.

Appendix A: Decision-Making Flowchart for WIDA Alternate ACCESS Participation

This flowchart is intended to guide IEP teams and EL staff in determining whether a student should participate in the **WIDA Alternate ACCESS**. Use this tool alongside the eligibility criteria in this document. The decision must be individualized, documented in the IEP, and reviewed annually.



Appendix B: Guiding Questions to Support K-2 Decision-Making

The following questions can help IEP teams and EL staff evaluate whether the WIDA Alternate ACCESS is appropriate for students in grades K-2. These questions should guide, but not replace, the team's full review of the student's instructional profile and IEP documentation.

- Has the student had consistent and meaningful access to instruction in English?
- Are observed language delays consistent with a most significant cognitive disability, or might they reflect early language development, speech/language impairment, or limited prior instruction?
- Can the student engage with WIDA ACCESS tasks when provided supports and accommodations (for example, in-person human reader or scribe)?
- Is the team reasonably confident the student will meet the criteria for alternate academic assessments in grade 3?
- What is the plan for revisiting this decision when updated instructional, observational, and assessment data becomes available?

Appendix C: Example Scenarios to Support K-2 Decision-Making

The following fictional scenarios are illustrative only. They are intended to support team discussions and not replace full consideration of the student's individual context.

Scenario 1: Kindergarten Student with Multiple Disabilities

Background: Student A is a kindergarten student newly enrolled in a Minnesota district. He has been identified as an English learner using the WIDA Screener for Kindergarten. Student A also receives special education services under the categories of developmental cognitive disability and physical impairment. He has limited vocalized communication, is learning to use an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device, and requires full physical assistance for many daily tasks.

Decision: The IEP team, in collaboration with the EL teacher and caregivers, determines that Student A meets the state definition of a student with a most significant cognitive disability. Based on his accessibility needs, the team concludes that WIDA ACCESS is not appropriate, even with accommodations. The team selects WIDA Alternate ACCESS and documents the decision in the IEP.

Scenario 2: Grade 1 Student Receiving Speech/Language Services

Background: Student B is a first grade student receiving special education services under the category of speech/language impairment. She has a delay in expressive language and can be difficult to understand, especially when speaking English. Student B has been receiving EL services since kindergarten.

Decision: Although Student B has communication challenges, the IEP team determines that she does not have a most significant cognitive disability. With accommodations such as using the WIDA ACCESS Paper test and extending testing of a domain over multiple days, Student B can meaningfully participate in WIDA ACCESS. The team documents this decision in the IEP and continues to monitor her progress annually.

Scenario 3: Grade 2 Student New to U.S. Schools

Background: Student C is a second grade student who recently arrived from another country. Documentation of the student's disability history is limited. Currently, Student C uses gestures to communicate. The student qualifies for special education under the category of speech-language impairment, and the evaluation team is considering additional assessments later in the school year to better understand the student's learning profile.

Decision: The IEP team and EL teacher agree that more time and information are needed to determine if Student C meets the state definition of a student with the most significant cognitive disability. The team decides Student C will take the WIDA ACCESS with accommodations this year. The team will revisit the decision on WIDA Alternate ACCESS eligibility once additional evaluation and classroom data are available.