615 TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS, MODIFICATIONS, AND EXEMPTIONS FOR IEPS, SECTION 504 PLANS, AND LEP STUDENTS

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of the policy is to provide adequate opportunity for students identified as having individualized education program (IEP), Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504 accommodation plan (504 plan), or English Learner (EL) needs to participate in statewide assessment systems designed to hold schools accountable for the academic performance of all students.

II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

A. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Minnesota statutes require that public school students be assessed annually in reading, mathematics, and science. The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA), the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS), and Alternate Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (Alt MCA) are the standards-based accountability assessments used to meet this requirement.

The MCA and MTAS/Alt MCA are criterion-referenced assessments, which means they measure a snapshot of student learning of a fixed set of criteria: the Minnesota Academic Standards. The Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards are revised every ten (10) years, according to a schedule determined by the state legislature. When standards are updated, the statewide assessments are also updated with a new series to align to the new standards. The new assessments are administered when the new academic standards are fully implemented.

B. The Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS) and the Alternate Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (Alt MCA)

1. The Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS) and Alternate Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (Alt MCA) are the standards-based accountability assessments designed for, and limited to, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. They are designed to measure student progress toward Minnesota's academic standards and meet the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Students who receive special education services and meet the eligibility criteria may take the MTAS/Alt MCA.

2. In compliance with the transition to new Minnesota academic standards, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is developing alternative assessments, the Alt MCA, to replace the MTAS, according to the following schedule:

   a. Science Alternate MCA (2024-25 school year);

   b. Reading Alternate MCA (2025-26 school year); and

   c. Mathematics Alternate MCA (2027-28 school year).

III. DEFINITIONS

A. Most Significant Cognitive Disability

This term describes students whose cognitive impairments may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction. IEP teams may use the following characteristics to identify if a student has a most significant cognitive disability:

1. The student's cognitive functioning is significantly below age expectations. The IEP team can determine that a student may be significantly below the average cognitive functioning of typically developing peers by

   a. a standardized norm-referenced measure of cognitive functioning, or

   b. when formal cognitive assessments are inappropriate, invalid or documented in other ways, other data-based measures may be used to document functioning significantly below age expectations as referenced in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

2. The student's disability has a significant impact on their ability to function in multiple environments, including home, school and community.

3. The student needs explicit and intensive instruction and/or extensive supports in multiple settings to acquire, maintain and generalize academic and life skills to actively participate in school, work, home and community environments.

B. Other key terms are defined in the current MDE *Procedures Manual for the Minnesota Assessments* (see Resources).

IV. ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

A. Initial Steps

1. The school district will utilize the existing annual review of IEPs or 504 plans to review, on a case-by-case basis, and determine how a student with a disability will participate in statewide testing.

2. The IEP must review the student's instructional program to ensure that the student is receiving instruction linked to the general education curriculum to the extent appropriate. If instruction is not linked to the general education curriculum, the IEP team must review the student's goals and determine how access to the general curriculum will be provided.

3. The IEP team must first consider the student's ability to participate in the MCA, with or without accommodations. The IEP team must document, in the IEP, the reasons why the MCA is or is not an appropriate measure of the student's academic progress and how the student would participate in statewide testing.

   If the IEP team establishes that the MCA is not 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, the IEP team may consider the administration of an alternate assessment.

4. Participation decisions will be made separately for mathematics, reading, and science. Participation decisions must be made annually and documented in a student's IEP.

B. Alternate Assessment Eligibility Requirements

1. For a student with a significant cognitive disability to be eligible for an alternative assessment, the IEP team must determine that the following are true:

   a. the student's cognitive functioning to be significantly below age expectations;

   b. the student's disability has a significant impact on their ability to function in multiple environments, including home, school, and community; and

   c. the student needs explicit and intensive instruction and/or extensive supports in multiple settings to acquire, maintain, and generalize academic and life skills to actively participate in school, work, home, and community environments.

2. Alternate assessment participation decisions must not be made on the following factors:

   a. Student's disability category as defined in Minnesota Rules, part 3525.1325-1348;

   b. Educational environment or instructional setting;

   c. Participation in a separate, specialized curriculum;

   d. An expectation that the student will receive a low score on the MCA;

   e. Language, social, cultural, or economic differences;

   f. Concern for participation rate calculations at the district level.

V. ALTERNATE ACCESS FOR ELs

A. ACCESS for ELs

1. All English learners in grades K–12 in public schools are required to participate annually in an English language proficiency assessment. With very few exceptions, all English learners take the ACCESS for ELs.

   Minnesota students identified as English learners (ELs) require an additional assessment to determine their progress toward English language proficiency. These students take the WIDA ACCESS assessment annually. English learners who receive special education services and meet alternate assessment participation guidelines may take the WIDA Alternate ACCESS.

   The school district will utilize the existing annual review of IEPs or 504 plans to review, on a case-by-case basis, and determine how an identified EL student with a disability will participate in statewide testing. Some students with significant cognitive disabilities may be eligible to take the Alternate ACCESS for ELLs instead of the ACCESS for ELL.

B. Eligibility Requirements

1. The student is identified as an English learner (EL) and is reported as EL in student enrollment data submitted in the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS);

2. The student must have a most significant cognitive disability;

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

4. The IEP team must document, in the IEP, reasons the MCA is or is not an appropriate English language proficiency assessment for the student.

C. Alternate ACCESS participation decisions must not be made on the following factors:

1. The student's disability category alone;

2. The student's placement or instructional setting;

3. The student's language background, or other social, cultural, or economic factors;

4. An expectation that the student will receive a low score on the WIDA ACCESS ; and

5. A desire to simplify test administration, which may include behavioral concerns or anticipated emotional distress.

VI. GRANTING AND DOCUMENTING ACCOMMODATIONS, MODIFICATIONS, OR EXEMPTIONS FOR TESTING

See Chapter 5 of the current "Procedures Manual for the Minnesota Assessments" and Guidelines for Administration of Accommodations and Linguistic Supports.

VII. RECORDS

All test accommodations, modifications, or exemptions shall be reported to the school district test administrator. The school district test administrator shall be responsible for keeping a list of all such test accommodations, modifications, and exemptions for school district audit purposes. Testing results will be documented and reported.

Legal References:
Minn. Stat. § 120B.11 (School District Process for Reviewing Curriculum, Instruction, and Student Achievement Goals; Striving for Comprehensive Achievement and Civic Readiness)
Minn. Stat. § 120B.30 (Statewide Testing and Reporting System)
Minn. Stat. § 125A.08 (Individualized Education Programs)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.0660 (Academic Standards for Language Arts)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.0700-3501.0745 (Academic Standards for Mathematics)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.0820 (Academic Standards for the Arts)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.0900-3501.0960 (Academic Standards in Science)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.1300-3501.1345 (Academic Standards for Social Studies)
Minn. Rules Parts 3501.1400-3501.1410 (Academic Standards for Physical Education)

Cross References: MSBA/MASA Model Policy 104 (School District Mission Statement)
MSBA/MASA Model Policy 601 (School District Curriculum and Instruction Goals)
MSBA/MASA Model Policy 613 (Graduation Requirements)
MSBA/MASA Model Policy 614 (School District Testing Plan and Procedure)
MSBA/MASA Model Policy 616 (School District System Accountability)

Resources: Minnesota Department of Education (MDE): Alternate Assessments (accessed 12/31/25)
MDE: Statewide Assessments Policies and Procedures (accessed 12/31/25)
MDE: Eligibility Requirements and Decision-Making Tool for Minnesota Alternative Assessment (MTAS/Alternate MCA) (accessed 12/31/25)
MDE: English Learner Education (accessed 1/1/26)
MDE: Minnesota's Assessments for English Learners (accessed 1/1/26)
WIDA: WIDA Alternate ACCESS Participation Decision Tree (accessed 1/1/26)