

**Guidance for IEP Teams on  
Participation Decisions for the  
[NCSC Alternate Assessment]**

**August, 2013**

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## Contact information

# **Guidance for IEP Teams on Participation Decisions on the NCSC Alternate Assessment of English Language Arts and Mathematics**

## **Introduction**

This document is intended to help guide Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to determine whether the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, is the most appropriate assessment for an individual student. This assessment was developed by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) to ensure that all students are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to the grade level Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This assessment was developed to be part of a system of curriculum, instructional, and assessment tools, so that students with significant cognitive disabilities are able to participate in content instruction and assessments that are aligned to the CCSS.

IEP teams must consider a student's individual characteristics when determining whether a student with a disability should participate in the general assessment with or without accommodations, or in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. This document outlines steps that an IEP team should take in determining whether the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate for a student. These include: (a) reviewing student records and important information across multiple school years and settings (e.g., school, home, community), and (b) determining whether the student fits all of the criteria for participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] as outlined in this document.

## **Description of the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]**

[The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is a collaborative of 26 states and five national organizations that worked together to build an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities. NCSC applied lessons learned from the past decade of research on alternate assessments to develop a comprehensive and technically defensible assessment system.

### *Assessment Design*

The [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is an assessment of English language arts (reading and writing) and mathematics in grades 3-8 and 11. It is an on demand assessment of approximately 30 test items that assess approximately 10 prioritized content targets per grade level. These content targets were identified for each grade based on learning progressions and alignment to the grade level Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The assessment includes multiple choice items and constructed response items. Each content target is assessed by items that have been carefully and intentionally designed to assess a range of ability and performance.

### *Assessment Administration*

The assessment is delivered via computer, with allowances for flexibility in administration (for example, a student may respond to administrator-presented item stimuli rather than to the item stimuli on the computer). A trained testing administrator familiar to the student (e.g., the student's teacher) facilitates the administration, presenting items via paper or manipulatives as appropriate for the student. Items are administered to the student over the course of one or more testing sessions as needed for a student to

complete a content area assessment. Testing sessions are scheduled within a testing window of approximately two months, scheduled by the consortium.

The assessment uses an adaptive approach, meaning that each student receives items that have been determined to be an appropriate level of challenge. Embedded locator tests and classroom data help determine the items a student encounters. The administration script provides flexibility in the ways in which a student may interact with items, so that what is being measured is not changed.

## Participation Decisions

NCSC's *Participation Guidelines* are provided in Appendix A. IEP teams will want to use the guidelines to determine whether a student participates in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. The [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is administered each year to students in grades 3-8 and 11 who meet the required criteria. As reflected in the *NCSC Guidelines*, to participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], a student must meet all three of the following criteria:

1. **The student has a significant cognitive disability.** Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.
2. **The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).** Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level CCSS and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.
3. **The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measurable gains in the grade and age-appropriate curriculum.** The student:
  - (a) requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature, and
  - (b) uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings.

## Participation Descriptions

1. **A student with a significant cognitive disability** is one who has records that indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is defined as actions essential for an individual to live independently and to function safely in daily life. *Having a significant cognitive disability is not determined by an IQ test score, but rather a holistic understanding of a student.*
2. **The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).** The student's disability or multiple disabilities affect how the student learns curriculum linked to the CCSS. The student is learning content that is linked to (derived from) the CCSS that appropriately breaks the standards into smaller steps. NCSC has derived these smaller steps from the CCSS to guide instruction and they are called Core Content Connectors (CCC). A CCC is a representation of the essential "core" content of a standard in the CCSS. Each CCC was identified by examining hypothesized learning progressions aligned with the CCSS to determine

the critical content for students with significant cognitive disabilities. For information on the CCC, [click here](#) (state website).

3. The student's need for extensive direct individualized instruction is not temporary or transient. His or her need for substantial supports to achieve gains in the grade and age-appropriate curriculum requires substantially adapted materials and customized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across multiple settings.

The IEP is to consider the following information to determine whether the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate for an individual student:

- Description of the student's curriculum and instruction, including data on progress
- Classroom work samples and data
- Examples of performance on assessment tasks to compare with classroom work
- Results of district-wide alternate assessments
- Results of individualized reading assessments
- IEP information including:
  - Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), goals, and short-term objectives.
  - Considerations for students with individualized and substantial communication needs or modes (from multiple data sources)
  - Considerations for students who may be learning English as a second or other language (i.e., English language learners) that may interfere with an accurate assessment of his or her academic, social, or adaptive abilities.

### *Do Not Use the Following as Criteria for Participation Decisions*

In addition to the three criteria for determining participation, there are other issues that may affect a student's learning experience and his/her ability to learn that are **not appropriate** to consider during the decision-making process for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. These are:

1. A disability category or label
2. Poor attendance or extended absences
3. Native language/social/cultural or economic difference
4. Expected poor performance on the general education assessment
5. Academic and other services student receives
6. Educational environment or instructional setting
7. Percent of time receiving special education services
8. English Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated disruptive behavior
11. Impact of test scores on accountability system
12. Administrator decision
13. Anticipated emotional distress
14. Need for accommodations (e.g., assistive technology/AAC) to participate in assessment

### *Participation Tools*

There are several tools that may be helpful to IEP teams as they collect and organize evidence before making a decision about whether a student meets all of the criteria listed above. Participation forms and other tools designed to assist teams in collecting and reviewing evidence to determine whether it is appropriate for an individual student to participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] are provided in the appendices.

[Appendix A. Participation Guidelines.](#) This is a short form that IEP teams can use to make decisions about whether a student should take the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

[Appendix B. Participation Checklist.](#) This is a form that includes a way to indicate the evidence that was used in making decisions and the considerations that should not be the basis of making decisions.

[Appendix C. Decision Flowchart for Participation.](#) This shows the sequence of decisions made by IEP teams when determining whether a student should participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

This manual and tools are supported by a set of training materials that are available at (insert appropriate website). Included among the training materials are several sample student profiles, with explanation of how decisions were made about their participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. *Who decides that a student should participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]?*

The IEP team makes the determination of how a student will participate in statewide assessments. The IEP team must follow the NCSC Participation Guidelines if they are to assign a student to participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. No one member of the IEP team makes this decision. Parents, teachers, and administrators make the decision based on evidence and adherence to the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] *Participation Guidelines* and *Guidance for IEP Teams*.

### 2. *How do we know that a student has a “significant cognitive disability”?*

NCSC does not define a “significant cognitive disability” in terms of a “cut off” IQ score. Most students with significant cognitive disabilities have intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism, but not all do. And, not all students with these disabilities are considered to have a “significant cognitive disability.” Students demonstrating academic deficits or difficulties due to learning disabilities, speech-language impairments, and emotional-behavioral disabilities do not qualify for participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. Performing 3-4 grade levels below peers without disabilities is not, by itself, evidence of a significant cognitive disability. Academic deficits or difficulties alone do not indicate that a student has a significant cognitive disability. Further, a significant cognitive disability will be pervasive, affecting student learning across content areas and in social and community settings.

Students with autism or intellectual disabilities should be carefully considered for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], but they should not automatically be assigned to the alternate assessment based on their identified disability category. Not all students with autism or intellectual disabilities have a significant cognitive disability. Many students eligible to receive special education and related services under these categorical labels are able to participate in general assessments, with accommodations.

Students receiving special education services who are identified as having orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, or traumatic brain injuries, do not necessarily have a significant cognitive disability. Determinations for student participation in statewide assessments must be evidence centered and made individually for each student by the IEP team.

Students demonstrating mild to moderate cognitive disabilities may be more appropriately placed in the general assessment system with accommodations. Anticipated or past low achievement on the general assessment does not mean the student should be taking the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. [Further, students who were in assessments based on modified achievement standards should not be moved to the NCSC Alternate Assessment].

*3. How do I know if the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate for an ELL with an IEP whose language proficiency makes it difficult to assess content knowledge and skills?*

An ELL should be considered for the alternate assessment if (a) his/her intellectual functioning indicates a significant cognitive disability using assessments in his/her home language as appropriate, and (b) he/she meets the other participation guidelines for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]. Assessments of adaptive behavior and communication should take into account linguistic and sociocultural factors for valid interpretation of these assessments, alongside the information on goals and instruction in the student's IEP used to determine what may or may not be a significant cognitive disability. If an ELL with an IEP does not meet the criteria for the alternate assessment, he/she should take the general assessment with accommodations as appropriate.

*4. Why is it important to indicate that a student, participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], is receiving instruction on content linked to the CCSS and his/her performance measured against alternate achievement standards?*

The decision to align a student's academic program to the Core Content Connectors that are linked to the CCSS and participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] limits a student's direct contact with the breadth of the CCSS for the grade level in which he/she is enrolled. This limited or modified exposure to the grade level standards may have significant impact on academic outcomes and post-secondary opportunities.

*5. What if it is impossible to assess a student because the student does not appear to communicate?*

All attempts should be made to find a route of communication with the student as soon as he or she is enrolled. If various approaches and technologies do not appear to demonstrate a route of communication, then consider that all behavior that the student exhibits is a form of communication, and use this as the starting point. A critical element in assessing all students is a focus on communicative competency as the base for student access to the CCSS. Best practice would indicate that students should enter Kindergarten with a communication system that allows them to demonstrate an understanding of academic concepts prior to entering the third grade. However, with or without a communication system, students must still participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

6. *If a student has been tested in the past on an alternate assessment, but the current IEP team determines that the student does not meet the NCSC Participation Guidelines, can the student be assigned to the general assessment?*

Yes. The IEP team must ensure that the student receives appropriate instruction on the CCSS and participates in the required general assessments for their current grade level with or without accommodations.

7. Is it possible that a decision to participate in an AA-AAS could change as a student gets older?

Participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] requires that the student has a significant cognitive impairment and interacts with content that has been significantly modified from that which is provided to the student's typically developing peers. Even though students with significant cognitive disabilities often are identified early, prior to starting school, they may be able to participate in the general assessment during their elementary grades. IEP teams should be especially cautious about assigning students with significant cognitive disabilities to an alternate assessment in their early school years. When the level of support needed for the student to participate in the breadth of the CCSS and the general assessment increases, the team may determine that participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is appropriate.

Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to continue to need supports to live as independently as possible throughout their adult lives after high school. Students who did not need early intervention services, or who are unlikely to need substantial daily supports in their adult lives, probably do not have a significant cognitive disability and would not be appropriately placed in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

8. *Who can we ask if we have questions about this important decision?*

Contact your state department of education if you have any questions about participation decision making for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].

*For information about the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] contact:*

[Someone's Name]

Phone Numbers

[Person 1.email@their.work.plc](mailto:Person 1.email@their.work.plc)

[Another's Name]

Phone Numbers

[Person 2.email@their.work.plc](mailto:Person 2.email@their.work.plc)

*For assistance with instruction for students who participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]:*

[Another's Name]

Phone Numbers

[Person 3.email@their.work.plc](mailto:Person 3.email@their.work.plc)

[State is encouraged to include state policy on graduation or diploma requirements]

November, 2014

[State is encouraged to include a description of the process for dealing with parent disagreement about the NCSC [Alternate Assessment] participation decision]

## Glossary

**AAC:** Augmentative and Alternative Communication (e.g., speech generating devices such as text-to-speech communication aids, picture or symbol boards, etc.)

**Accommodation:** A change in materials or procedures that facilitates access during instruction and assessment. Accommodations do not change the construct or intent of what is being taught or measured. Assessment accommodations are intended to allow the student to participate in the assessment and to produce valid results that indicate what a student knows and can do.

**Adaptive behavior:** Behaviors defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS):** The CCSS are a set of content standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics that define what students are expected to learn at each grade in order to leave school ready for college or careers. The CCSS were developed by teachers, school administrators, and experts, with support from the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. For information on the CCSS, click here (state website).

**Communicative competence:** The use of a communication system that allows students to gain and demonstrate knowledge.

**Constructed response items:** Student forms an answer to a question rather than choosing from answer options.

**Content target:** Content targets identify those content standards that are the focus of the assessment. For the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] the content targets are defined by the Core Content Connectors in English language arts and mathematics.

**Core Content Connector (CCC):** A CCC is a representation of the essential “core” content of a standard in the CCSS. Each CCC was identified by examining hypothesized learning progressions aligned with the CCSS to determine the critical content for students with significant cognitive disabilities. For information on the CCC, click here (state website).

**Participation criteria descriptor:** These descriptors provide further information about the characteristics students would have in order to meet the three participation criteria for the NCSC Alternate Assessment

**English Language Learner (ELL):** An ELL is a student whose native language is a language other than English or a student who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual’s level of English language proficiency. An ELL’s difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be a barrier to learning in classrooms instructed in English and to performance on assessments presented in English.

**Evidence:** This refers to the specific sources of information being used to identify student characteristics that either meet or do not meet the participation criteria.

**Extensive direct individualized instruction:** Concentrated instruction designed for and directed toward an individual student. This type of instruction is needed by students with significant cognitive disabilities to acquire knowledge and skills in content. Students with significant cognitive disabilities are likely to need this extensively to apply knowledge and skills in multiple contexts.

**Learning progression:** A learning progression is a description of the way in which typically developing students may develop and build academic competencies over time. Learning progressions can be useful tools for teachers to use to determine where a student is in the process of learning a specific skill or understanding a concept.

**Modification:** A change in materials or procedures during instruction and assessment that changes the learning expectations of the grade level content. Modifications during instruction may be appropriate on a temporary basis for scaffolding the student's understanding and skills. Assessment modifications result in invalid measures of a student's knowledge and skills and thus should be avoided.

**Pervasive:** Present across academic content areas and across multiple settings (including school, home, and community).

**Selected response items:** Assessment items that are structured for students to respond by choosing an answer (e.g., multiple choice, true or false, etc.)

**Substantial supports:** Substantial supports include support from the teachers and others (e.g., resource teacher, co-teacher, aide) and various material supports within the student's environment. Examples include adapting text for assessments and learning, and extensive scaffolding of content to support learning.

**Substantially adapted materials:** Substantially adapted materials include various classroom and other materials that have been altered in appearance and content from the materials that peers without disabilities use for instruction or assessment. Examples include significantly shortening the length of passages, or using raised dots and hand-over-hand counting when identifying a matching number in math.

# Appendix A

## *Determination of Participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment]*

### NCSC Participation Guidelines

**The criteria for participation in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] reflect the pervasive nature of a significant cognitive disability. All content areas should be considered when determining who should participate in this assessment. Thus, a student who participates in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] participates in this assessment for all content areas.**

In addition, evidence for the decision for participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] is **Not Based** on:

1. A disability category or label
2. Poor attendance or extended absences
3. Native language/social/cultural or economic difference
4. Expected poor performance on the general education assessment
5. Academic and other services student receives
6. Educational environment or instructional setting
7. Percent of time receiving special education services
8. English Language Learner (ELL) status
9. Low reading level/achievement level
10. Anticipated disruptive behavior
11. Impact of student scores on accountability system
12. Administrator decision
13. Anticipated emotional duress
14. Need for accommodations (e.g., assistive technology/AAC) to participate in assessment process

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Agree (Yes) or Disagree (No)? Provide documentation for each
<b>1.</b> The student has a significant cognitive disability	Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.  <i>*Adaptive behavior is defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.</i>	Yes / No
<b>2.</b> The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)	Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade level CCSS and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.	Yes / No
<b>3.</b> The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade-and age-appropriate curriculum.	The student (a) requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature and (b) uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across multiple settings.	Yes / No

**The student may participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] if all responses above are marked Yes.**

# **Appendix B**

## ***Participation Checklist***

**[NCSC Alternate Assessment]  
Participation Decision Documentation**

To meet the criteria for the [NCSC Alternate Assessment], the student must meet all participation criteria descriptors.

Participation Criteria	Participation Criteria Descriptors	Sources of Evidence [check if used]
<p>1. The student has a significant cognitive disability</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></p>	<p>Review of student records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.</p> <p><i>*Adaptive behavior is defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of Individual Cognitive Ability Test</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of Adaptive Behavior Skills Assessment</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual and group administered achievement tests</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of informal assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of individual reading assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of district-wide alternate assessments</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Results of language assessments including English language learner (ELL) language assessments if applicable</p>
<p>2. The student is learning content linked to (derived from) the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></p>	<p>Goals and instruction listed in the IEP for this student are linked to the enrolled grade-level CCSS and address knowledge and skills that are appropriate and challenging for this student.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives and materials including work samples</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals and objectives from the IEP</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Data from scientific research-based interventions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Progress monitoring data</p>
<p>3. The student requires extensive direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achieve measureable gains in the grade-and age-appropriate curriculum.</p> <p>YES <input type="radio"/> NO <input type="radio"/></p>	<p>The student (a) requires extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature and (b) uses substantially adapted materials and individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate and transfer skills across academic content.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives, and materials including work samples from both school and community based instruction</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Teacher collected data and checklists</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals, and objectives, and post school outcomes from the IEP and the Transition Plan for students age 16 and older unless State policy or the IEP team determines a younger age is appropriate</p>

**The student may participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] if all responses above are marked Yes.**

<b><i>Additional Considerations Not to Use in Reviewing Evidence</i></b>	
1.	<i>A disability category or label</i>
2.	<i>Poor attendance or extended absences</i>
3.	<i>Native language/social/cultural or economic difference</i>
4.	<i>Expected poor performance on the general education assessment</i>
5.	<i>Academic and other services received</i>
6.	<i>Educational environment or instructional setting</i>
7.	<i>Percent of time receiving special education services</i>
8.	<i>English Language Learner (ELL) status</i>
9.	<i>Low reading level/achievement level</i>
10.	<i>Anticipated disruptive behavior</i>
11.	<i>Impact of test scores on accountability system</i>
12.	<i>Administrator decision</i>

13.	<i>Anticipated emotional duress</i>
14.	<i>Need for accommodations, e.g., assistive technology/AAC to participate in assessment process</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Evidence shows that the decision for participating in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment] <b>was not</b> based on the above list.</i>

*IEP Team Statement of Assurance: Our decision was based on multiple pieces of evidence that, when taken together, demonstrated that the Alternate Assessment is the most appropriate assessment for this student; that his/her academic instruction will be based on the CCCs linked to the CCSS; that the Additional Considerations listed above were not used to make this decision; and that any additional implications of this decision were discussed thoroughly.*

Each of us agrees with the participation decision in the [NCSC Alternate]:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent(s)/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix C

## ***[NCSC Alternate Assessment]***

## ***Participation Decision Flowchart***

**Consider These:**

Results of Individual Cognitive Ability Test, Adaptive Behavior Skills Assessment, individual/group/ administered achievement tests, and district-wide alternate assessments, and English language learner (ELL) language assessments, if applicable

Data from scientific research-based interventions, progress monitoring data, results of informal assessments, teacher collected data and checklists

Examples of curriculum, instructional objectives, and materials, work samples from school or community based instruction

Present levels of academic and functional performance, goals, and objectives, and post school outcomes from the IEP and the Transition Plan if applicable

1. Do the students' records indicate a disability or multiple disabilities that most significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior?\*

\*Adaptive behavior is defined as essential for someone to live independently and to function safely in daily life.

Yes ↓

2. Would the student be appropriately challenged by goals and instruction linked to the enrolled grade-level CCSS knowledge and skills?

Yes ↓

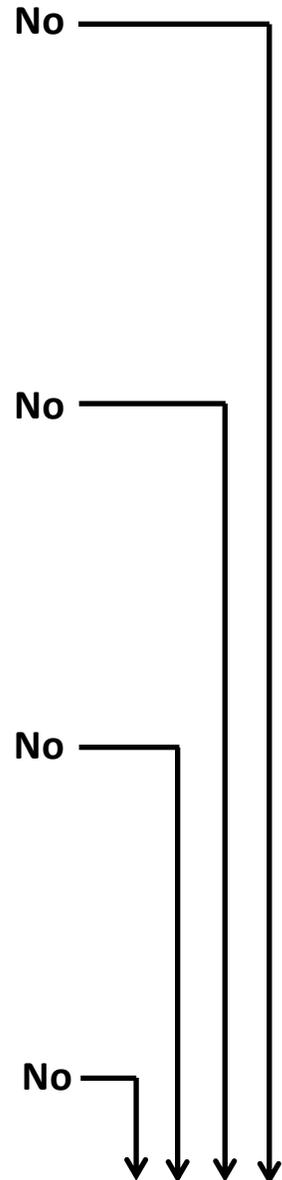
3a. Does the student require extensive, repeated, individualized instruction and support that is not of a temporary or transient nature?

Yes ↓

3b. Does the student use substantially adapted materials with individualized methods of accessing information in alternate ways to acquire, maintain, generalize, demonstrate, and transfer skills across academic content?

Yes ↓

Student may participate in the [NCSC Alternate Assessment].



Student must participate in the [blank] assessment. Student may be eligible to use accommodations. If there are questions, please contact [state] at [number].