Division of Accountability and Assessment
and
Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services

Alternate Maryland Assessment (Alt-MSA)

Measuring the Academic Progress of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires that all students in public schools in grades 3 through 8 and in at least one high school grade be assessed on academic content standards. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 further requires states to establish alternate assessment opportunities so that all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities, may participate in statewide and district assessment programs. The Alternate Maryland State Assessment, or Alt-MSA, is Maryland’s alternate assessment program for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Some Facts about the Alternate Maryland State Assessment (Alt-MSA)

- In Maryland, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participate in the Alt-MSA.

- The Alt-MSA measures a student’s progress on skills in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8, and in high school grade 10.

- The Alt-MSA also measures a student’s progress on skills in science in grades 5, 8 and 10.

- The Alt-MSA is not a traditional assessment given to students one time during the school year. Instead, the Alt-MSA uses a six-month assessment window to combine instruction with assessment. Students are instructed on customized learning objectives. When the student masters the objective, evidence of mastery is placed in a portfolio.

- The team that teaches and works with the student in the school is the Test Examiner Team (TET) for the student in the Alt-MSA program. This team may include the student’s general education teacher, special education teacher, related service providers, and instructional assistants when under the direct supervision of the teacher or related service provider.
1. What are Mastery Objectives?

Mastery Objectives are also known as “MOs”. MOs represent the skills and concepts on which a student will be instructed and assessed for the Alt-MSA.

2. How are appropriate MOs selected for each student?

The team that teaches and works directly with the student in the school selects from the Alt-MSA MO Bank or writes the most appropriate MOs to be assessed. Before selecting MOs, the team must have a clear picture of the student’s unique abilities, and an understanding of the student’s IEP goals. The team selects MOs that are:

- Appropriate for the student’s ability level;
- Challenging to the student; and
- Attainable during the six-month assessment window.

3. What should the team avoid when selecting MOs?

The team should avoid selecting MOs that go beyond a student’s ability level. When using grade level content, teachers can back map to prerequisite skills that may better meet the ability level of a student. This process allows the teacher to select skills that the student needs to learn to meet grade level content standards. If the team is unable to find an appropriate MO within the Alt-MSA Online MO Bank choices provided, the team may choose to write a more appropriate objective.

For example, a teacher wants to select a mathematics MO for a student in grade 8 in the content standard area of Algebra, Patterns and Functions. The student is functioning at a six-month to nine-month ability level. The teacher should not select an MO that would require the student to write equations and inequalities to represent relationships. Although this skill is grade level, it would be considerably beyond the student’s ability level. In order to make instruction purposeful for this student, the teacher would need to consider “back mapping” to a prerequisite skill. A more appropriate MO may be found at the prekindergarten grade level, which uses manipulatives to teach the prerequisite skill of equations and inequalities. The student would explore relationships by comparing groups of objects to determine more or less.

4. Does the student’s IEP identify MOs for assessment?

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) identifies the specially designed instruction, accommodations/modifications and related services needed to help a student with a disability access and make progress in the general curriculum. The IEP is not intended to be a student’s entire curriculum. The IEP team considers the range of needs for students in both academic and functional skills. Because skills in reading and mathematics are crucial for access to learning in all areas of life, the IEP team selects pertinent reading and mathematics objectives for each
student.

It is important to keep in mind that not all IEP goals link to academic content standards. Such IEP skills are important and will be addressed during a student’s instructional day, but not in the context of academic content. These skills are not to be assessed in the Alt-MSA. Other IEP goals are academic and have sufficient alignment to state standards to prepare students for the assessment required by federal laws. The IEP team has the opportunity to select clearly defined objectives that are developmentally appropriate, functionally relevant, and can be assessed on the Alt-MSA. The degree to which the student’s IEP goals and objectives align with the Alt-MSA will differ based on the needs of each student.

5. Does the Alt-MSA include MOs that align to functional life skills?

The Alt-MSA includes many MOs that align to functional life skills. Functional life skills refer to a variety of skills that are frequently demanded in natural domestic, vocational and community environments. These skills, which support communication, social skills, requisite learning behaviors, emotional / behavioral skills, as well as academics, are essential to the student’s participation in a variety of community environments. Functional life skills should not be taught in a separate curriculum, but should be taught in the context of curricular content when appropriate. Reading and mathematics skills are functional skills when applied to real experiences and everyday activities. Typical IEP skills such as cooking, basic job skills, and how much to pay for and make change from a purchase can be found within the current bank of MOs for Alt-MSA.

Other IEP skills that are considered functional skills may be embedded within adapted grade-level activities across content areas and not taught in isolation. These IEP skills could include, but are not limited to: matching, sequencing, sorting, choice making, activating a switch to increase communication, increasing vocabulary, following direction, release and grasp, making a choice, letter and number recognition, answering Yes/No questions, counting, and following a schedule, working with money.

Consider the following student scenarios:

- When an elementary student is taught how to measure liquids, the student can learn to measure liquids for cooking and can practice grasping and releasing the utensils needed to complete a recipe. The student will decide where ingredients fit within the sequence of steps in the recipe. The student may practice number recognition to learn how many cups of an ingredient are used for the recipe when reading the directions (picture vocabulary recipe). Then the student may practice counting how many cups of an ingredient are used during the cooking activity.

- When a middle school student is learning reading skills through the use of nonfiction materials, the student can learn to identify nonfiction materials, such as cookbooks, application forms, and newspapers, using his or her communication device to answer “yes/no” questions, follow directions in a recipe, or fill out personal information on an application form.

- When a high school student is studying sequencing steps in an investigation and
measuring the correct amount of liquids during a science lesson on chemical reactions, the student may sort the materials needed for the investigation, then focus on which household or job site chemicals to avoid mixing, learning the correct safety signs when reading labels on products.

- When certain IEP skills cannot be taught within the context of academic instruction, time should be set aside to teach the skills in their natural occurring environment.

The purpose of special education is to ensure that all children have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. Once a high school student completes the Alt-MSA in grade 10, the student will have an academic foundation that will be needed as he/she prepares for transition to appropriate adult activities. This may result with educational goals to increase the skills needed for activities of daily living; as well as to increase the skills needed for further education and employment. The academic skills and other skills for independence will assist the student to make a smooth transition to adulthood.

6. Can an MO be repeated from one year to the next?

Yes. An MO from a previous school year may be selected again. However, the content used to teach the MO would change in the new grade and the student would be assessed using different material. For example, in Comprehension of Informational Text, one of the MOs is “Given a set of directions/instructional manual/set of rules, the student will read the functional document and follow the steps.”

The following is a sample list of appropriate functional documents located in the State Curriculum that a teacher could use at different grade levels to assess this same MO year to year. The State Curriculum for all content areas can be found at www.mdk12.org.

- Grade 3: Classroom or Social Game Rules and/or Sets of Directions
- Grade 4: Other functional document (Classroom Schedule)
- Grade 5: Steps in a Science investigation
- Grade 6: Following a Recipe
- Grade 7: Using Fast food and Restaurant Menus
- Grade 8: Following steps in a “How to” Pamphlet on planting flowers for a prevocational activity
- Grade 10: Following a Work Schedule

7. Does the Alt-MSA take away from classroom instruction?

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No. The Alt-MSA portfolio is developed within the student’s daily instructional program. IEP and Alt-MSA instruction and assessment are not separate from one another. They are inclusive.

Alt-MSA provides a way during instruction to determine whether a student has learned the skills that the teacher has taught consistent with the student’s IEP. Teachers are strongly encouraged to begin working on Alt-MSA MOs early in the school year. Typically, a teacher works towards teaching and assessing two reading and mathematics MOs each month within the testing window. For students being assessed on science content, the teacher may teach one science MO each month. The science MO can sometimes be taught within a reading or mathematics lesson.

The instructional process is shaped and adjusted based on the information gathered through ongoing assessments. Thoughtful planning, organization, and shared ownership of the Alt-MSA among the team that teaches a student will result in a portfolio that conveys student learning.

8. What about students who are medically fragile or miss several days or weeks from the school year?

All students who receive a public education must participate in statewide assessment of academic progress. Students who are medically fragile or miss several days or weeks of school should participate in the Alt-MSA when present in school. If home and hospital instruction is put in place, the teacher will continue to collect data for the student’s portfolio in the home or hospital, as appropriate.

9. What types of artifacts may be included in a portfolio to demonstrate a student’s mastery of a MO?

Teachers’ plan how each MO will be taught and the type of artifact that would best reflect the students’ mastery of the skill. Teachers have several choices in the types of artifacts they submit, including:

- **Work Sample:** This artifact can be a worksheet that demonstrates the student’s performance on a given task or objective.
- **Data Chart:** This artifact summarizes the student’s progress toward mastery of an objective with the teacher documenting what he/she observed the student doing when performing the task.
- **Videotape:** This artifact shows how the student performs on the task while the student is completing the task (real time).
- **Audiotape:** This artifact may be appropriate for certain types of MOs that require a student to verbally provide a response.

When selecting the appropriate artifact, teachers must consider the nature of the student’s
disabilities. For a student who is cognitively functioning below 24 months of age and works with assistive technologies and manipulatives, the Work Sample artifact may be too abstract. Instead, the teacher may choose to use a Data Chart or Videotape. That way, the teacher can document the student’s performance on an objective as the student is performing a task.

Parents/Guardians are invited to review the artifacts in their child’s portfolio prior to submission for scoring and are asked to complete the Parent/Guardian Review Form.

10. **How is the Alt-MSA portfolio scored?**

Professionals scoring staff are hired and trained according to specifications established by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Maryland teachers and MSDE staff are involved in developing and improving training materials to ensure quality, consistency, and integrity for all aspects of the scoring project.

Two independent scorers using the Alt-MSA scoring rubric score each portfolio twice. Maryland teachers, in collaboration with the MSDE, develop the scoring rubric. The scoring rubric can be found in Part 5 of the Alt-MSA Handbook. If a discrepancy between scores exists, a third scorer would score the portfolio. If the third scorer is unable to assign a final score then an MSDE staff makes the final score decision. Educators from across the state developed performance level descriptors for the Alt-MSA.

The performance levels are designated as Basic, Proficient and Advanced. The student will receive a score for each content area. The score is based on the percentage of MOs attained:

- **Basic** if fewer than 60 percent of MOs are achieved;
- **Proficient** if at least 60 percent but less than 90 percent of MOs are achieved; or
- **Advanced** if 90 percent or greater of MOs are achieved

Although, some students will be considered proficient or advanced on the Alt-MSA, this designation is based on the student mastering skills when provided with the appropriate prompting and/or instructional supports according to their IEP. Results are reported as part of the State Education Accountability Program that meets the NCLB and IDEA requirements. The Alt-MSA proficiency scores in reading and mathematics contribute to school, local school system, and State Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Performance level descriptors for each reading, mathematics and science are found at: [http://docushare.msde.state.md.us/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-93889/Alt-MSA%20PLDs.pdf](http://docushare.msde.state.md.us/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-93889/Alt-MSA%20PLDs.pdf)
11. How do teachers receive feedback regarding how their student has performed on the Alt-MSA?

Aggregated results at the school, local school system and state level are reported on the Maryland School Report Card website (http://www.mdreportcard.org).

A Report to Principals, giving individual student results, is sent to the local school systems to provide feedback to the school team about how their student(s) performed on the Alt-MSA. This report provides additional information on the Alt-MSA scores, including the errors (known as “condition codes”) found in the artifacts during the scoring process. Schools have been granted permission by the MSDE to make copies of the artifacts that were submitted for scoring and retain these copies in the student’s confidential assessment folder in his/her school for review when results are returned.

The individual student data results can be used by local school systems to examine current instructional practices, improve the portfolio development process and determine the resources that may be needed to implement the Alt-MSA at the school or district level.

Examples of condition codes, which have been established based on the range finding and scoring process, include:

- **A student’s name is missing from an artifact.** At times, multiple students’ artifacts have been placed in a portfolio making it difficult for a scorer to determine to whom the student work belonged. This is why Alt-MSA requires that a student name be placed on each student’s artifact.

- **The artifact date is incomplete or not present on the artifact.** This is a requirement of Alt-MSA to ensure that all artifacts are administered within the assessment window. In the past, assessment security concerns have been raised when dates on artifacts were misrepresented or changed.

- **A page number missing from an artifact.** This would **not** render a condition code.

12. Is the Alt-MSA a valid assessment?

The Alt-MSA was developed according to professional assessment development standards. The United States Department of Education along with peer reviewers from other states have reviewed the Alt-MSA and determined that the Alt-MSA is a valid and reliable assessment. Each teacher receives the *Alt-MSA Handbook* and is provided intensive training and other strategies to support the process. The Handbook provides clear guidelines for the development of a student’s Alt-MSA Portfolio. The Handbook can be found on the Maryland State Department of Education website www.marylandpublicschools.org.
13. **What resources are available to assist teachers with the Alt-MSA?**

There are many resources available to teachers to assist them in constructing the Alt-MSA Portfolio to include:

- Professional Development on Issues Pertaining to the Alt-MSA Process and Scoring
- Online Alt-MSA Professional Development Modules
- Content Guidance Documents for reading, mathematics and science
- MSDE Grant funds for local school systems
- Exemplar and Condition Code Artifact Packets
- Ongoing Technical Assistance/Support is Provided Daily via Telephone Calls, Emails, Site Visits by MSDE staff

14. **Who are the Alt-MSA Facilitators and what is their role with the Alt-MSA process and implementation?**

Each local school system appoints an Alt-MSA Facilitator to serve as a liaison between the MSDE and the local school system. The Alt-MSA Facilitators meet with the MSDE monthly and are provided professional development related to reading, mathematics and science. In addition, best practices for implementing the Alt-MSA are reviewed and instructional resources are shared among the group. Alt-MSA Facilitators review the Alt-MSA Handbook annually and provide feedback to the MSDE for refinements and revisions.

15. **Who can a parent contact if they have questions or concerns regarding the Alt-MSA?**

Parents, who have questions or concerns about their child’s Alt-MSA, should first speak to their child’s classroom teacher, school testing coordinator and, then your child’s school principal. If you need further assistance, you can speak to your Alt-MSA Facilitator at the district level or the Local Accountability Coordinator. You can also contact MSDE directly and speak to the Program Manager for Alt-MSA in the Division of Accountability and Assessment or the Section Chief for Alternate Assessments in the Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services for any assistance with the Alt-MSA.

**Additional Information on Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards**

Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Achievement Standards Non Regulatory Guidance from the United States Department of Education

Parents Guide to Learning Opportunities through Alternate Assessment released by the United States Department of Education
http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/learning/learning-opportunities.pdf

U. S. Office of Special Education Programs; Toolkit on Teaching and Assessing Students with Disabilities
http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/index.asp

National Center for Education Outcomes
http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/altAssessTopic.htm

National Alternate Assessment Center
http://www.naacpartners.org/

The Access Center: Improving Educational Outcomes for All Students k-8
http://www.k8accesscenter.org/index.php/category/standards-assessments/

For more information, call 410-767-7548

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