

Frequently Asked Questions about the SC-Alt

What is the SC-Alt?

The South Carolina Alternate Assessment (SC-Alt) is a state assessment designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in a school curriculum that includes functional and life skills as well as academic instruction.

The SC-Alt consists of a series of [performance tasks](#) in each subject area that allow students to respond in a variety of ways, such as pointing and eye gazing to the correct response, selecting objects or pictures or picture symbols that represent the correct answer, or reading letters, words, or sentences to complete a task. The tasks are linked to the state academic content standards in four areas, English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies.

The SC-Alt only tests a student's achievement in academic subjects such as ELA, mathematics, science and social studies. IEP reports and other methods provide parents and teachers with information on how students are progressing in the other areas in which they receive instruction.

What is meant by a student with a significant cognitive disability?

A student with a significant cognitive disability is one who requires substantial modifications, adaptations, or supports to meaningfully access the subject area content and requires intensive individualized instruction in order to acquire and generalize knowledge. Students with significant cognitive disabilities who are eligible to participate in the alternate assessment may be included in any of the disability categories listed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Why should students with significant cognitive disabilities participate in academic instruction and assessment?

The primary reason to teach academic content to students who also require instruction in functional and life skills is to promote equal opportunity to receive the educational content all students receive. Educators are finding that once this opportunity is provided, many students are gaining useful skills that benefit them now and in the future. Students may not master all of the grade level content but they may master some content for their grade level. The alternate assessment provides a way to demonstrate this mastery.

There are also laws that require that all students participate in academic instruction and assessment. Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) require that states provide an alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities that is linked to grade level academic content standards. The state Education Accountability Act of 1998 (EAA) specifies that all students must be included in state accountability systems.

Students with disabilities benefit instructionally from participating in state and district-wide assessments. It is a way to ensure that all students are included in the general education curriculum. Including students in accountability systems has

resulted in parents, teachers, and schools paying more attention to the instruction necessary to improve achievement for all students.

Participation in assessment programs should lead to improved teaching and learning for students with significant disabilities.

Who decides if a student participates in SC-Alt?

The individualized education program (IEP) team, which includes the parents as equal members, determines how students will be assessed. They review information about the student's progress across multiple years and areas and decide if the student should take the PASS or HSAP with accommodations or if the student meets the [criteria for alternate assessment](#).

What is the difference between the SC-Alt and the PASS or HSAP tests?

The Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) and the High School Assessment Program (HSAP) are aligned to grade level state academic content standards. The SC-Alt is linked to grade level standards in a less complex way or at a pre-requisite skills level. The SC-Alt is a series of performance tasks that are scored by the teachers and students can respond in their typical mode of communication such as using assistive technology, pointing or using picture symbols. The results are scored against alternate achievement standards which describe what students can do related to the standards.

The PASS and HSAP tests are typical paper and pencil tests that assess students based on the state academic standards for their grade. Students may use accommodations such as extended time or having test questions read aloud, but they are tested on the same content as all other students in the grade. The expectation of what they should be able to do is based on grade level achievement standards.

What does the SC-Alt look like?

The assessment includes a series of [performance tasks](#) and each task includes several items related to the activity. Each student responds to approximately 5-7 tasks and each task includes 4 or 5 items. Tasks are designed to be accessible by students with a variety of ways of responding. Each task is linked to a grade level standard that is simplified through a statement called a [measurement guideline](#) or [extended standard](#).

Can a student earn a high school diploma if he or she participates in the SC-Alt?

No, students who the IEP team determines meet the participation criteria for SC-Alt are students who are participating in a curriculum that does not lead to a high school diploma. The achievement levels for the alternate assessment are not the same as the expectations for the PASS and HSAP. Passing the HSAP assessment is one requirement for a high school diploma but students must also earn units in the core content as another requirement for a high school diploma.

What do you mean by academic skills for students with significant cognitive disabilities?

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation requires that students who are participating in alternate assessment have access to the depth and breadth of grade level curriculum and that the alternate assessment include questions in all areas of the academic content. For example, in mathematics, students should receive instruction in concepts of numbers and the other areas of math such as algebra, geometry, measurement and data and probability. In English language arts (ELA), students should receive instruction in reading, writing, and communication. This instruction should be designed to link to the essence of the academic standards at a less complex or pre-requisite skill level.

Students who demonstrate emerging academic skills may be beginning communicators and not yet have a symbolic means of understanding or making their needs known. Reading skills for these students may include learning to recognize the meaning of an object or a picture or being able to indicate that they want more of a story read by a shift in body position, gestures, reaching or tapping. Other students may read with picture symbols or some words and numbers.

What can I do at home to help my child learn?

You can read and reread favorite stories to you son/daughter to help him/her understand that objects and words have meaning. Stories help students sequence events and anticipate what might happen next. Provide objects related to the story for your son/daughter to hold to help with this understanding. Label and describe what is happening in everyday activities. Show your son/daughter photographs of events that they have participated in such as an everyday activity or special events such as trip to the zoo. Count with your child as you complete household chores such as setting the table or putting on socks and shoes. Ask your child to hand you one more or indicate that he or she wants one more.

Ask your child's teachers for some suggestions based on the instruction he or she is receiving in school. The more opportunities your child has to practice these skills, the more meaningful they will be.

How are scores reported and used?

The SC-Alt scores are one source of information regarding student performance on standards based skills. They provide an opportunity to track information on student progress from year to year and provide accountability information for state and federal reporting.

Students receive a score of [Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 or Level 4](#). on the SC-Alt. The information on what your student knows and can do in each of these levels is the most important information to you.

SC-Alt is also an accountability measure and the results provide information on how schools and districts are doing as well. The level 2 score is the score reported as meeting the state accountability requirements for "Basic" on the district report card

and the levels 3 and 4 are counted as meeting proficiency for the federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reporting.

Keep in mind that the alternate assessment only tests a student's knowledge in academics and that teachers also routinely assess students in other areas such as daily living skills.

Who do I contact to find out more about the SC-Alt?

If your child participates in the SC-Alt, you may contact your child's teachers. Also staff members in the Office of Assessment at the South Carolina Department of Education who can assist you with information about the SC-Alt are:

Douglas Alexander 803-734-3923 dgalexan@ed.sc.gov

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