

ESSA-Era Alternate Assessment Trends

AUTHORS: **Meagan Karvonen**, Melissa Gholson, Nami Shin, Sue Bechard

Overview

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) shifted federal policy from a cap on the percentage of alternate assessment scores that could be counted as proficient for accountability purposes to a 1% participation threshold for alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards. This policy change prompted states to focus on which students should be eligible to participate in alternate assessments.

This study examined trends across 15 states administering DLM[®] assessments from 2017–2024 to better understand how alternate assessment participation, student characteristics, and achievement outcomes have changed over time in response to the ESSA requirement.

© 2026 Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM), the University of Kansas. All rights reserved. Any or all portions of this document may be reproduced and distributed without prior permission provided the source is cited as:

Karvonen, M., Gholson, M., Shin, N., & Bechard, S. (2026). *ESSA-Era Alternate Assessment Trends* (Project Brief 26-01). University of Kansas, Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems.

The authors would like to acknowledge Liz Kavitsky and Sarah Lipinski for their technical writing contributions.

Key findings

DLM participation across the 15-state sample declined by more than 10% from 2017 to 2024. At the same time, the assessed population became increasingly concentrated among students with extensive support needs:

- » A higher proportion of students with autism, intellectual disability, or multiple disabilities
- » Fewer students with more complex expressive communication skills
- » Fewer students who communicate only through speech
- » A higher proportion of students taught in separate instructional settings

Key takeaway: The alternate assessment population is smaller but includes a greater proportion of students with intensive communication and instructional support needs.

Ten percent decrease in the total number of students taking assessments from 2017 ($n = 83,220$) to 2024 ($n = 74,810$).



Characteristics Stable Over Time

- » Proportion who are multilingual/English learners
- » Average teacher-rated academic skills
- » Math achievement

Characteristics Changing Over Time

- » Primary disability
- » Expressive communication complexity
- » Expressive communication mode
- » Instructional setting
- » ELA achievement

Continued ▷

Key findings, continued

Achievement trends reflect population shifts

As the assessed population changed, the overall achievement trends changed as well. Researchers observed declines in English language arts achievement, while mathematics achievement remained relatively stable. These findings suggest that achievement trends should be interpreted alongside the changes in the assessed population. Some students who previously participated in alternate assessments may now be participating in general assessments, raising important questions about achievement outcomes across both assessment systems.

Key takeaway: Changes in achievement trends likely signal shifts in who is taking the assessment, not simply lower performance.

Differences across state policy approaches

States exceeding the 1% threshold have the option to apply for a waiver for the 1% requirement while taking steps to reach that target. States that pursued ESSA 1% waivers experienced larger population shifts than states that did not pursue waivers, including:

- » Larger declines in students with more complex communication skills
- » Larger declines in speech-only communicators
- » Greater declines in ELA and mathematics achievement

Implications

Assessment interpretation

Population shifts should be included in interpretations when describing both alternate and general assessment achievement trends. Changes in participation may affect the results for each assessment and should be considered when evaluating longitudinal trends.

Assessment validity

States should consider whether changes to alternate or general assessment designs are needed so that all students can access the assessments and demonstrate their knowledge, supporting fair and valid results for evolving student populations.

Student supports

The growing concentration of students with intensive communication and instructional needs underscores the importance of specialized instruction, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports, and educator professional learning for students taking alternate assessments. At the same time, students transitioning from alternate assessments to general assessments will require additional supports and highly effective instruction to ensure meaningful participation and opportunities to achieve grade-level academic expectations.

Family decision-making

Families and IEP teams need clear information to make informed decisions about student placement in the least restrictive environment and participation in statewide assessments.

Looking ahead

ESSA-era participation requirements coincided with meaningful changes in the students participation in alternate and general assessments. Understanding these shifts is essential for interpreting achievement trends, maintaining valid assessment systems, and ensuring all students receive appropriate instruction, supports, and assessment opportunities.

At a glance

- » More than 10% decline in alternate assessment participation within the 15-state sample studied between 2017 and 2024
- » More students with intensive support needs
- » Declining ELA achievement; stable mathematics achievement
- » Larger shifts in waiver states
- » Implications for validity, policy, and practice