

# Participation Guidelines for New Assessments: Thinking Through Their Development

Students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs) participate in state assessment systems. Some participate in the regular assessment and some students with disabilities participate in an alternate assessment.<sup>1</sup> How they participate is guided by each state's assessment guidelines for inclusion. These guidelines define the ways in which students may participate in the assessment system (regular or alternate assessment), and the criteria for determining which assessment a given student will take.

As the Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia work to develop a common assessment system for member states, they should consider the common participation criteria they will develop, not only for special education students but also for students on 504 plans and ELLs. Where states are coming from in terms of participation rates and participation criteria is important for the Consortia to consider as they move toward common assessments with common participation criteria.

This Brief provides a snapshot of the participation of special education students and ELLs on statewide assessments.<sup>2</sup> It focuses on data for grade 8 reading assessments, and suggests points for the Consortia to discuss as they develop common participation criteria.

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<sup>1</sup> ELLs, including ELLs with disabilities, also may participate in a state's English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment. These assessments also are part of the assessment system and should be considered, but are not directly addressed in this Brief.

<sup>2</sup> The data for special education students are the most recent verified data available from the electronic submission that states send to the U.S. Department of Education. Data also are available for other grades and for mathematics from the NCEO Web site ([nceo.info](http://nceo.info)) under the APR section. The data for ELLs are publicly reported data for 2008-09 reading assessments.

## About this Brief

This Brief addresses the need for the Consortia to develop shared assessment participation criteria for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and ELLs with disabilities. It presents information that shows the variability in member state assessment participation rates and criteria. This Brief also identifies ways to address the perspectives underlying variability in participation rates and the questions that Consortia may need to ask as they develop their common participation criteria.

This and other Briefs in this series address the opportunities, resources, and challenges that cross-state collaborative assessment efforts face as they include students with disabilities and English language learners. Topics in this series (e.g., accommodations, participation) are intended to support a dialogue grounded in research-based evidence on building inclusive assessment systems. Each Brief provides an overview and discussion of issues, as well as insights into potential next steps and additional data needs for Race-to-the Top Assessment Consortia decision making.

## Participation Rates

Participation rates in states reflect the total participation across the regular and alternate assessments in the system. Figure 1 shows assessment participation rates of special education students on grade 8 reading assessments administered in the Consortia states. In the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium, the average participation rate of special education students across all assessments was 96%. In the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) states, it was 98%.

Despite these similarities in overall participation rates, the percentages of special education students participating in the states' regular assessments varied dramatically. In the PARCC states, the regular assessment participation rates varied from 39% to 93% of special education students. In the SBAC states, regular assessment participation rates varied from 64% to 94% of special education students.

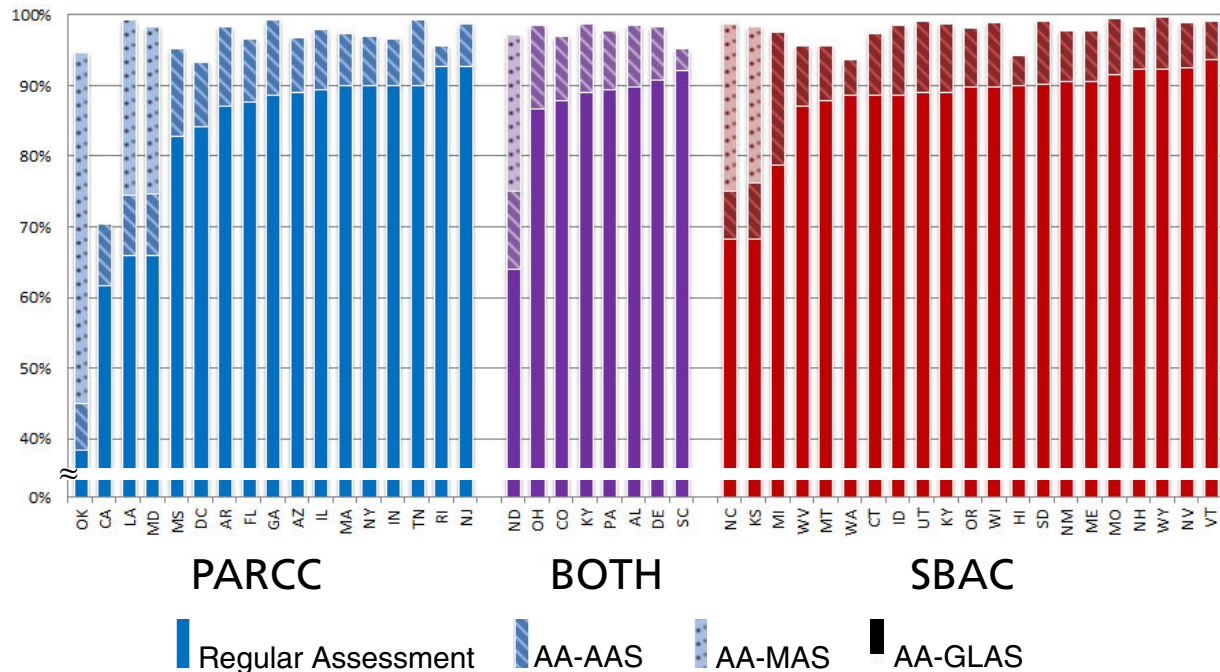
This variation was due in part to the varying alternate assessments available in each state.

All states had an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS), but some also had an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) or an alternate assessment based on grade-level achievement standards (AA-GLAS).

Across the states in the two Consortia, AA-AAS participation rates ranged from 3% to 19% of special education students. Six of the states in the two Consortia submitted participation data for their 2008-09 AA-MAS. Across these states, AA-MAS participation rates varied from 22% to 50% of special education students. Participation rates in the two states that submitted AA-GLAS data were well below 0.5% of special education students.

Limited data from public reports are available for ELLs. Having these data would allow the Consortia to better judge the extent to which ELLs are participating fully in the assessment system. For the 2008-09 regular grade 8 reading assessments, only 10 of the PARCC states and 21 of the SBAC states reported data for ELLs. In these states, participation in this assessment varied from 91% to 99% for PARCC and from 58% to 100% for SBAC.

**Figure 1. Participation Rates for Special Education Students on Grade 8 Reading Assessments**



Source: 2008-09 assessment data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. The state membership in the Consortia reflected in this figure was accurate as of May, 2011.

Variations in participation rates likely reflect differing perspectives on the inclusion of special education students and ELLs in regular assessments. Consortia states should address these varying perspectives as they plan their participation criteria. Further, the criteria will need to align with participation criteria for the AA-AAS consortia so that no students are left in a gap between the two assessments.

### Participation Criteria

States in the Consortia vary in their criteria for participation in their regular assessments. One example of this variability is their policies on whether special education students may be excluded from all state testing (see Figure 2). In both Consortia, some states allowed exclusion due to medical condition/illness, emotional distress, parent exemption, and absence. In the PARCC states, 68% prohibited exclusion for any reason; in the SBAC states, 48% prohibited exclusion.

There are also variations in the specific criteria that states in the two Consortia identify for use in making decisions about the assessment (regular, alternate) in which a student participates. For example, past performance is identified as a criterion for participation in an alternate assessment in 40% of PARCC states and in 28% of SBAC states. Instructional program or program

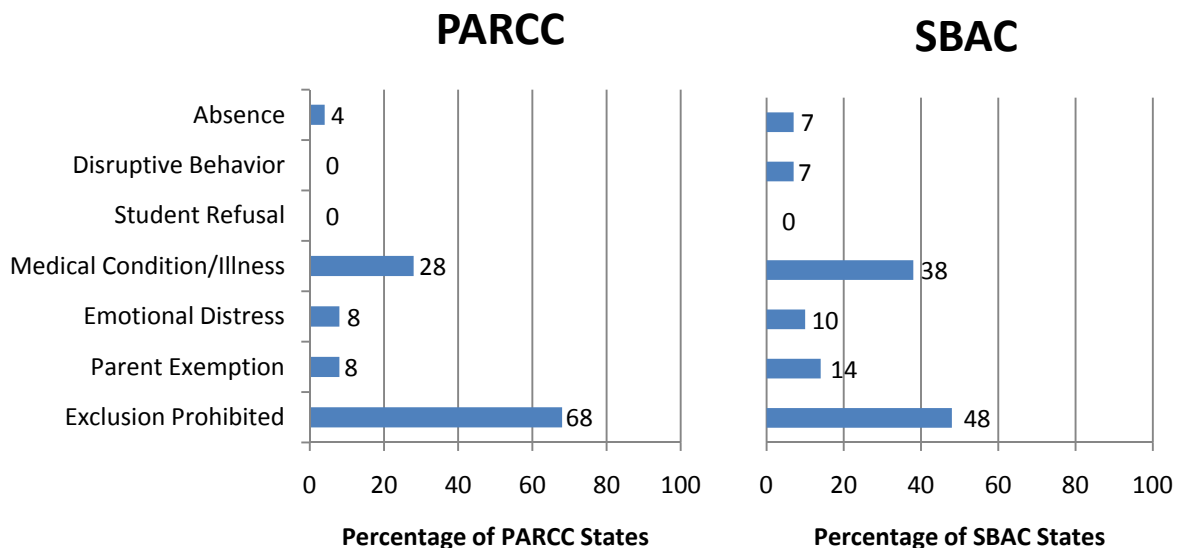
setting is identified as a factor that should **not** be considered in 32% of PARCC states and 21% of SBAC states.

### Discussion Points

The participation data and criteria presented in this Brief demonstrate that states are coming to the Consortia with different perspectives on the participation of students with disabilities and ELLs in their assessments. These differing perspectives should be considered and discussed as states develop consensus on the participation criteria for their common assessments. We offer several discussion questions as springboards for reaching consensus and developing mechanisms to collect and share perspectives on participation criteria for the Consortia’s common assessments:

1. Why do participation criteria for the regular assessment differ across states?
2. To what extent are the differences in participation rates tied to the purpose and content being tested, and to what extent have other factors affected participation criteria?
3. How are related issues of available and allowed accommodations influencing decisions about assessment participation in member states?
4. What principles should guide the development of participation criteria and practices? How can data inform the development of these principles?

**Figure 2. Summary of Circumstances in Which Special Education Students are Not Included in Any Form of Statewide Assessment**



Source: NCEO Synthesis Report 83 (see Resources), 2009 participation criteria.

5. What mechanisms should be used to ensure that participation criteria for the regular assessment and the AA-AAS are complementary so that there are no gaps in the assessment system?
6. What steps are needed to ensure that decision-making teams in each member state are prepared to use new participation criteria to support their decision making?

Beyond the development of participation criteria, the Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia states should address the implementation of the participation criteria they develop. Consortia should include training on the participation criteria and monitoring of the results of decisions about participation in their efforts to implement common participation policies.

## Resources

The following resources can be found on the NCEO Web site ([nceo.info](http://nceo.info)) under the Reports section:

***A Principled Approach to Accountability Assessments for Students with Disabilities*** (Synthesis Report 70). (2008). Thurlow, M.L., Quenemoen, R.F., Lazarus, S.S., Moen, R.E., Johnstone, C.J., Liu, K.K., Christensen, L.L., Albus, D.A., & Altman, J. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

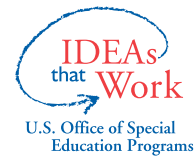
***2009 State Policies on Assessment Participation and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities*** (Synthesis Report 83). (2011). Christensen, L.L., Braam, M., Scullen, S., & Thurlow, M. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

***2008-09 Publicly Reported Assessment Data for ELLs*** (in preparation). (2011). Albus, D., Liu, K., Christensen, L., & Thurlow, M. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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