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The Alt-MSA Handbook: An Overview of Alt-MSA for Parents and Teachers

What is the Alternate Maryland School Assessment?

The Alternate Maryland School Assessment, or "Alt-MSA," is Maryland's assessment program designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The Alt-MSA measures a participating student's progress on attainment of Mastery Objectives in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and 10. Alt-MSA also includes Mastery Objectives in science for those students in grades 5, 8, and 10.

The Alt-MSA is not a traditional test that is given one time during the year. Instead, Alt-MSA combines instruction consistent with the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and assessment. The IEP team including teachers and other related service providers select reading and mathematics learning objectives and tailor these to each individual student. These objectives are shared with parents/guardians so they are informed about their student's instructional program. From the beginning of the school year in September through March students are instructed on these objectives. When the student masters the objective, evidence of the student's mastery is placed in a notebook or portfolio. This portfolio of a student's learning and accomplishments is scored by a contractor. The scores on the assessment are recorded on the Home Report which is sent to the student's parents or guardians, in order to give them a summary of their student's learning and progress during the window of instruction and ongoing assessment.

Results from Alt-MSA are summarized at the school, school system, and state level, and are combined with results from the regular Maryland School Assessment as part of Maryland's Education Accountability program.

Why was the Alt-MSA developed?

There are a number of federal statues and regulations which require all students to be assessed. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) stipulates that all students in public schools in grades 3 - 8 and in at least one high school grade be assessed (Maryland has selected grade 10 to be assessed) and receive an individual student test score in reading and mathematics. NCLB also requires that science be assessed in an elementary grade, a middle school grade, and a high school grade. Maryland has chosen to assess students in grades 5, 8, and 10 in science, in order to fulfill this federal mandate. The assessments in reading and mathematics are included as measures of School Performance Index (SPI) at the school, school system, and state levels. The science assessments are not currently part of AYP accountability calculations.

NCLB allows states to provide an "Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards." An assessment of this type is an assessment designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who meet specific participation guidelines. Students who meet these guidelines are those who are unable to participate in a regular

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"Alt-MSA" is Maryland's assessment program for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Alt-MSA measures a student's progress on attainment of Mastery Objectives in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and 10 and in science for students in grades 5, 8, and 10.

Alt-MSA combines instruction with assessment. Students are instructed on tailored learning objectives, and when the student masters the objective, evidence of mastery is placed in a portfolio.

The Alt-MSA was developed in part in response to the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 also mandates that all students participate in state and district assessments.

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assessment, even when accommodations are provided to them. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandates that all students participate in state and district assessments and ensures access to the general curriculum when implementing statewide accountability systems.

The Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR), Title 13A, contains Maryland's State education regulations. COMAR mandates that all students receiving public education in Maryland be instructed in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, health, art, music, and physical education. COMAR also requires that students participate in State assessments that are applicable to their grade (MSA or Alt-MSA) or the course they are taking (High School Assessment end-of-course tests).

In Maryland, students with disabilities participate in either the

- Maryland School Assessment (MSA) for mathematics and reading in grades 3 – 8, with or without accommodations as appropriate, or the High School Assessment (HSA) end-of-course assessments in Algebra/Data Analysis, English, and Biology, with or without accommodations as appropriate
- Modified High School Assessment (Mod-HSA) end-of-course assessments in Algebra/Data Analysis, English, and Biology
- Alternate Maryland School Assessment based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards (Alt-MSA) for mathematics and reading in grades 3-8, 10, and science in grades 5, 8, 10

The Alt-MSA is intended for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and participation is determined by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

Visit the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE's) web site (http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/testing) for more information on the Maryland assessments.

What academic areas does the Alt-MSA assess?

As mentioned above, the Alt-MSA is based on the premise that all students, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, must receive instruction in and be assessed on skills and knowledge in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science. For all students in Maryland, the Maryland State Curriculum (SC) and now Common Core State Standards (CCSS) specifies the specific content standards for each grade and content area on which students' instruction and testing is based. For students with the most significant cognitive disabilities participating in Alt-MSA, the content standard objectives for a given grade and content area are most often not appropriate. As a result, a standardized, grade level assessment is not appropriate. Instead, teachers select the grade level reading, mathematics, and science content from the SC and reduce the complexity, modify it, and/or adapt it to ensure student learning.

It is important to remember that the Alt-MSA is more than an assessment. Alt-MSA assures ongoing reading, mathematics, and science instruction integrated into each student's daily program. Alt-MSA learning and assessment targets should be consistent with

and, in many cases, overlap with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives.

What is the process for creating and implementing the Alt-MSA for a student?

Selecting Mastery Objectives Tailored to the Student

Through a pre-assessment process or through the review of the data from the student's prior year Alt-MSA results, each student's educational team determines which specific skills and concepts in reading (grades 3 - 8 and 10), mathematics (grades 3 - 8 and 10), and science (grades 5, 8, and 10) on which the student will be concentrating for instruction and assessment. For Alt-MSA, the student's educational team is called the "Test Examiner Team" (TET). These professionals work together to identify 10 "Mastery Objectives" (MOs) in reading (grades 3 - 8 and 10), 10 in mathematics (grades 3 - 8 and 10), and 5 in science (grades 5, 8, and 10), which are appropriate for the student to learn.

All MOs must strike a balance between challenging the student (since without challenge, there is no learning) and attainability (since lack of attainability can lead to frustration). Equipped with the knowledge of the student's capabilities and past accomplishments, the TET selects appropriate MOs from an item bank containing thousands of objectives aligned with each grade's SC in each of the content areas. The MOs in the Item Bank were developed by Maryland teachers, "in conjunction with testing contractor," and used in instruction and assessment. If the TET is unable to find an existing MO within the bank that is appropriate, the team has the option of writing (rather than selecting) an objective.

Obtaining Baseline Data

An important part of the MO selection and development process is obtaining "baseline" data on the objective. Once an MO has been determined by the TET, either by selecting the MO from the Item Bank or newly writing it, the team collects data to ensure that the student has not already mastered the objective. Providing instruction and assessment on something which the student already knows or is able to do is not a responsible use of the student's, staff's or school's time; baseline data therefore allows the TET to make a decision on the student's instructional program based on data from the student's own performance. Baseline data is always collected by not providing the usual supports which a student normally receives. If a student can master an objective prior to instruction and without the normal array of supports, then clearly the objective is not challenging enough for the student, and the objective must be revised. This approach also allows for the situation in which a student is not able to master a particular skill or knowledge component independently, but whose goal will be to work towards independence on a task which he or she can currently perform only with assistance and support of the instructional team.

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For Alt-MSA, the student's educational team identifies "Mastery Objectives" in reading, mathematics, and science appropriate for the student.

All MOs must strike a balance between challenging the student and being attainable.

Once an MO has been determined, the TET collects data to ensure that the student has not already mastered the objective.

Next, the TET enters the objectives into a secure online application called *Alt-MSA Online*.

The MOs are then electronically submitted for review by the school Principal.

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Once MOs have been established for each student, the TET undertakes the process of instruction and assessment for each student.

MOs not selected from the Item Bank are reviewed by MSDE's test contractor. After the contractor review, the TET electronically receives feedback on each objective.

As the student is receiving instruction and is being given the opportunity to demonstrate mastery, a portfolio of student work (Alt-MSA artifacts) is assembled by the TET.

Obtaining Approval or Feedback on MOs

As part of the process of selecting or writing the MOs for each student, the TET enters the objectives into a secure online application called ***Alt-MSA Online***. This system creates a record of the current year Alt-MSA MOs, and the TET can also use it to access MOs from prior years to ensure that a student's instructional and assessment program is varied and well-rounded.

Once MOs are selected or written by the team, they are electronically submitted for review by the school Principal or his or her designated instructional leader. The Principal's review is an important aspect of the Alt-MSA process, because the Principal can help to provide feedback to the TET on the appropriateness of MOs for particular students. The TET receives feedback from the Principal review, adjusts the MOs as needed, and resubmits the MOs to the Principal in order to receive a final sign-off at the school level.

MOs selected directly from the Item Bank are automatically "pre-approved," meaning that the MOs are known to be aligned with the Maryland SC, and now the CCSS, are measurable, and have gone through the school-level review to ensure that they are appropriate for the student and strike a balance between the dual goals of challenge and attainability. A student's reading, mathematics, and science instructional program has thus been developed. Instruction towards mastery of these pre-approved objectives can begin immediately.

MOs which are newly written by the TET, even though they have received Principal approval, are reviewed by MSDE's test contractor. Once the MO has been approved by the Principal, however, instruction should begin, with the knowledge that some adjustments may need to be made once the review feedback has been received by the TET.

This contractor technical review is needed to ensure that the written MOs (those not selected from the approved MO item bank), are properly aligned with the SC and that they are measurable. Without this review, it would be possible, for example, for a TET to write an MO that does not measure one of the Maryland content standards. This MO would then inappropriately drive instruction, and when the MO is submitted for scoring, it would be judged to be "non-scorable," and therefore not mastered. Thus, the contractor MO review ensures that students and staff are not penalized because of a mistake in the way an MO is written. After the contractor review, the TET receives written feedback on each objective, indicating whether the MO is approved as is, or if it requires edits, and, if so, what the nature of those edits are. The TET then revises the MOs as necessary.

Instruction and Assessment for Alt-MSA

Once MOs have been established for each student, the TET undertakes the process of instruction and assessment for each student. The Alt-MSA testing window allows for six full months of instruction and assessment. This allows the TET to teach the MOs over time and to make instructional adjustments to support student learning. Typically, TETs plan on working towards a student receiving instruction and demonstrating mastery on 2 reading and 2 mathematics objectives in each of October, November, December, January, and February. For students being assessed on science content, the TET would also target instruction and assessment of 1 science MO in each of those 5 months.

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Documenting Student Mastery in the Alt-MSA Portfolio

As the student is receiving instruction and is being given the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of his or her MOs, a portfolio of student work (Alt-MSA artifacts) in reading, mathematics and science (grades 5, 8, 10) and other supporting information is assembled by the TET. When completed, the portfolios are packed, shipped, and scored by the Alt-MSA contractor, in accordance with protocols and procedures established by MSDE.

TETs have some choices in the types of artifacts they submit to document a student's mastery of their objectives. One type of artifact is *student work*. This can be a worksheet or other assignment which demonstrates the student's level of performance on a given task or objective. One piece of student work, the example of work specifically showing mastery, is required to be included in the portfolio, in addition to the student's baseline performance.

Because of the nature of some students' disabilities, it may be difficult for a student to generate a piece of paper that represents his or her work. In these cases, the TET may generate another type of artifact, a *data chart*, that summarizes the student's instruction and progress towards mastery of an objective. Because a data chart is further removed from the student's actual work, the data chart must contain evidence of at least three instances of instruction prior to mastery, to ensure that the TET is providing appropriate instruction to the student.

Another type of artifact is a *videotape*. Videotaping of at least one reading and one mathematics artifact is required for each portfolio. This requirement is in place to ensure that the professionals who score the portfolio are able to get a sense of the student, his or her capabilities, and how he or she performs in the classroom. Videotape allows the TET to capture baseline performance and mastery of MOs with students who may not be able to generate "paper" student work to go into a portfolio. For example, a student may be working with various assistive technology, and the videotape artifact is able to capture the student's actual performance on the objective.

A final type of acceptable artifact is an *audiotape*, which may be appropriate for certain types of Mastery Objectives.

Each type of artifact has specific, detailed requirements which are outlined in the *Alt-MSA Handbook*. These various requirements are in place to ensure that the artifacts have clear information identifying the student, his or her specific Mastery Objective, and sufficient detail about the student's performance for a trained scorer to review the artifact and make a judgement as to whether the objective was mastered or not mastered. Artifacts missing critical information cannot be scored and are judged "non-scorable."

Scoring the Portfolio

After the portfolios are complete and the testing window is at a close, the portfolios are packed and shipped to the contractor's secure scoring site for check-in and processing (to ensure that a data record is created for each student and portfolio).

Artifacts may be student work, data charts, videotape or audiotape.

After the portfolios are complete they are packed and shipped for scoring.

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The role of the scorers is to ascertain whether the evidence submitted (an artifact) demonstrates that the student has attained the MO.

Once scoring is complete, Home Reports are sent to local schools for distribution to parents/guardians.

Many resources are available to assist in constructing the Alt-MSA, including:

>Professional Development Sessions

>Central Office Support in Instruction

>MSDE Technical Assistance

>MSDE Web Site

>*Alt-MSA Online* Web Site

The portfolios are scored by professional scoring staff hired and trained according to MSDE's specifications by the Alt-MSA contractor.

- MSDE staff and Maryland teachers are actively involved in the development of anchor sets, training materials, qualifying sets, validity, and calibration sets through the "rangefinding" process to ensure quality, consistency, and integrity throughout all aspects of the scoring project.
- MSDE technical staff is present at all times during the scoring project and is the final authority when scoring questions arise.
- The role of the scorers is to ascertain whether the evidence submitted (an artifact) demonstrates that the student has attained the Mastery Objective by meeting all the conditions. The criterion for a judgment of mastery is 80%–100% as is stated in the Mastery Objective.

After each artifact has been scored, the percentage of artifacts mastered for each content area is determined.

- Based on these overall mastery percentages, students are assigned a proficiency level of "Basic," "Proficient," or "Advanced."
- For reading, mathematics and science, students will be assigned "Basic" if fewer than 60% of Mastery Objectives are achieved, "Proficient" if at least 60% but less than 90% of Mastery Objectives achieved, and advanced if 90% or greater of Mastery Objectives are achieved. The proficiency levels of Alt-MSA for Reading and Mathematics contribute to School Performance Index (SPI) as part of Maryland's State Education Accountability System.

Reporting the Results

Once scoring is complete, the Alt-MSA contractor creates data files with student test results that are sent to MSDE and then on to the local school systems. The contractor also generates student Home Reports which are sent to local schools for distribution to parents/guardians near the end of the school year. Parents and guardians should contact their local school if they have any questions about the results from Alt-MSA.

What resources are available to assist teachers with the Alt-MSA?

Teachers and parents should keep in mind that Alt-MSA is nothing more than a standardized method of documenting the regular ongoing process of instruction and learning which occurs in the classroom during the school year. There are many resources available to teachers to assist them in constructing the Alt-MSA portfolio for each of their students. Every staff member involved in Alt-MSA must receive an *Alt-MSA Handbook*, written by staff at MSDE with input from local school systems, and attend professional development sessions on how to properly implement the Alt-MSA. Local school systems provide staff development and central office support in reading, mathematics, and science instruction; using assistive technologies, and best practices for instructing students with significant cognitive disabilities. Additionally, MSDE technical assistance is available from the Division of Special Education/Early Intervention Services (DSE/EIS) and the Division of Curriculum and Assessment (DCA), the MSDE Web site (http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/testing), and the *Alt-MSA Online* Web site (http://www.altmsa.com).

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ALT-MSA Facts & Myths

Myth: Parents have a right to decide if their child should participate in testing required by No Child Left Behind Federal mandate.

Fact: The Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team determines in which assessment a student with a disability will participate.

As a member of the IEP team, parents/guardians work collaboratively with the team to determine the assessment in which a student with a disability will participate. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act require that all students participate in Statewide and district assessments. In Maryland, students with disabilities in grades 3 – 8 participate in either the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) for reading and mathematics, with or without accommodations; or the Alt-MSA in reading, mathematics, and science. High school students take the High School Assessment (HSA) end-of-course assessments in Algebra/Data Analysis, English, and Biology or the Alternate High School Assessments based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards (Mod-HSA) or the Alt-MSA in grade 10. Participation and modifications are determined by the student's IEP team.

Myth: The IEP is the curriculum for my child.

Fact: COMAR (13A.04.14.01) states that all students must be provided an instructional program in reading and mathematics and other content areas, including science, social studies, health, art, music, and physical education.

Each local school system utilizes the Maryland State Curriculum as the guide to daily instruction. The IEP is not a curriculum. According to IDEA 2004, the term "individualized education program" or "IEP" means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised by the student's IEP team. The IEP includes:

- A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance;

- How the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum;

- For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives; and

- A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals. The IEP is designed to meet the needs that result from the child's disability and enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum.

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Myth: Alt-MSA is not a valid assessment because teachers create, administer, and score student work that is submitted in the portfolio and provide the prompts used during instruction.

Fact: Alt-MSA is a portfolio assessment that is comprised of student work that demonstrates linkage to the Maryland State Curriculum. The United States Department of Education along with peer reviewers from other states have reviewed Alt-MSA and determined that the Alt-MSA is a valid and reliable assessment.

The Handbook provides clear guidelines for the development of a child's Alt-MSA portfolio. Each teacher receives the *Alt-MSA Handbook* and is provided with intensive training, substitutes, and other strategies to support the process.

Myth: The Alt-MSA takes time away from instruction.

Fact: Alt-MSA provides a way to determine whether the student has learned the reading and mathematics instruction that must be provided, consistent with the IEP.

The instructional process is shaped and adjusted by the information gathered through ongoing assessments. The documentation that makes-up the Alt-MSA portfolio is direct student work products and may include instructional objectives included on the IEP. These are based on the required reading and mathematics instructional program that is designed specifically for each student's level of instruction. These are not extra tasks separate from the instructional program. The instructional model describes what teachers are required to be teaching. Data collection is a required component of every instructional program in both general education and special education. Collecting documentation (portfolio development) of student attainment of instructional objectives builds the foundation of evaluation of student achievement. That achievement is reported on local school system report cards, IEP quarterly reports, and at IEP annual review meetings. This is similar to general education practices where general education teachers teach and provide ongoing assessments that are graded, evaluated, and reported to parents via report cards. The assessment period of September to March allows opportunities to assess student skills that are acquired at varying rates during the instructional period.