

ACTION REQUIRED

April 28, 2006

TO THE ADMINISTRATOR ADDRESSED:

SUBJECT: TAKS-Alternate Assessment for Certain Special Education Students

This letter provides important information regarding the implementation of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills – Alternate (TAKS-Alt) assessment including student participation requirements, technology requirements, and funding options for technology infrastructure.

Overview of TAKS-Alt Implementation

As described in the January 12, 2006, letter to all administrators, TAKS-Alt is an assessment currently being developed to meet federal requirements for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. In 2007-2008 TAKS-Alt will replace the locally determined alternate assessments (LDAA) for grades 3–9 reading; grades 3–10 and exit level mathematics; grades 4 and 7 writing; grades 5, 8, 10, and exit level science; grades 8, 10, and exit level social studies; and grades 10 and exit level English language arts. TAKS-Alt is designed to measure the academic progress of students who meet participation requirements.

In fall 2006, Texas Education Agency (TEA) staff will observe classrooms and conduct pilot testing of the TAKS-Alt prototype using a small set of volunteer districts or campuses. In spring 2007 students with disabilities who meet the participation requirements will be included in the TAKS-Alt field test and are allowed to be counted as participants in the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) calculations that school year. Therefore, technology infrastructure described in this letter must be in place for spring 2007 and beyond.

Under a flexibility agreement reached on November 30, 2005, between TEA and the U.S. Department of Education, students who participate in the TAKS-Alt field test will be included in the performance calculation as non-proficient. TAKS-Alt will be fully implemented in 2008, at which time TEA may include the proficient scores of students who take TAKS-Alt, as long as the number of those proficient scores does not exceed 1.0 percent of all students in the grades assessed. The 1.0 percent cap does not restrict the number of students who may participate in TAKS-Alt, but the cap does restrict the number of students who count toward AYP.

TAKS-Alt Participation Requirements

The attachment to this letter provides the participation requirements for identifying students with significant cognitive disabilities for whom TAKS-Alt would be appropriate. These requirements were developed in conjunction with the steering committee advising TEA on this alternate assessment. The steering committee includes representatives from education service centers, school district personnel who specialize in the education of students with significant cognitive disabilities, representatives from special education advocacy organizations, and parents of students with these types of disabilities.

TAKS-Alt Online Format

In order to make the new alternate assessment less burdensome to teachers, the TAKS-Alt system uses secure online technology that is designed for observational and alternative assessment methods. It provides teachers with easy-to-use tools for documenting students' work during teacher observations of an assessment task and for recording ratings, while also providing data for school, district, and state reporting.

The TAKS-Alt online system will assist teachers and administrators in streamlining the collection and reporting of the alternate assessment information. The purpose of the TAKS-Alt online system is to document and assess the academic knowledge and skills of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committees will be able to centralize each student's assessment records while simultaneously accessing information, reviewing individual student progress throughout the year, and maintaining records for future years.

There are many advantages to utilizing the TAKS-Alt online system because teachers can:

- enter assessment data online,
- document students' work online using multi-media files and/or teacher anecdotes to support assessment ratings,
- track and report progress for individual students, and
- use the online application to create reproducible masters and other status reports to assist in the collection of observations.

Teachers will use the TAKS-Alt online system to record their focused observations of student accomplishments during the assessment tasks. The online observation assessment will list the knowledge and skill statements for a specific content area and grade level. To give teachers immediate assistance and explanations, pop-up windows provide information about entry points into the TAKS objectives, example instructional activities, and sample evidence for the assessment. The online assessment also includes a section for observation notes so that teachers can provide an anecdotal record of student evidence as well as a section for a digital collection of student evidence to display the individual nature and quality of the student's work during the events-based assessment tasks.

Training

Training will be provided for all aspects of implementing TAKS-Alt through a series of online training modules. Training modules will be appropriate for any personnel involved in the education of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Initial training will be provided to assist districts in developing appropriate individualized education programs (IEPs) so that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities access the general curriculum that will be assessed by TAKS-Alt. Training modules dealing with the instructional and assessment decisions will be followed by training using the TAKS-Alt online system itself. More specific details about training modules and the technology infrastructure required will be communicated in the coming weeks; the first module is planned to be available beginning in August 2006.

TAKS-Alt Technology Requirements


Optimal Configurations

The website is delivered via the Internet and can be accessed from any Internet connection, as long as the minimum system requirements are met. It is critical that the computer/browser combination accessing the Internet is found on the list of supported configurations below. All browser downloads are available free.

Personal Computer (PC)	Macintosh
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Windows 98 or higher with Internet Explorer 6.0 or Mozilla Firefox	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mac OS 8.1 or OS X with Netscape 7.1• Mac OS 9.x with Netscape 7.02

Other Supported Configurations

Personal Computer (PC)	Macintosh
Windows 95 or higher <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internet Explorer 5.5 or higher• Netscape 6.2	Mac OS 8.1 or higher <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safari• Netscape 6.2 or higher

 **NOTE:** Internet Explorer on a Macintosh computer is not a valid configuration for users accessing the administrative tools.

TAKS-Alt will allow for the uploading of electronic files for the documentation of student's performance on instructional activities. The system will support a wide variety of media types, including digital photos, sound files, and Word documents. Depending on the documentation determined by the district to be appropriate, certain hardware and software would be necessary. For example, if a district decided to use digital photos, a digital camera and/or scanner and the supporting software would be required to upload digital photos. Please keep in mind that the minimum documentation required is simply text entered online.

Optimal Hardware

Ideally, all teachers of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities would have access to the Internet in, or at least near, their classroom. However, this may not be realistic in all cases. Therefore, for example, some teachers might require shared access to a computer with Internet connection in a campus or district office.

Funding Options

Guidance regarding the use of federal special education (IDEA-Part B) funds to support the implementation of TAKS-Alt will be available on the Division of IDEA Coordination's web page at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/special.ed/funding/taks-alt.html>.

Planning

Please use the information in this letter to plan for the implementation of TAKS-Alt in your district. TEA encourages you to share this information as appropriate throughout your school district with teachers, principals, curriculum directors, special education directors, information technology staff, and parents.

If you have questions, please contact the Student Assessment Division at (512) 463-9536 or alternate.assessments@tea.state.tx.us.

Sincerely,

Susan Barnes
Associate Commissioner for Standards and Programs

Attachment

cc: Education Service Center Executive Directors
Education Service Center Special Education contacts
District Test Coordinator
District Special Education Coordinator

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills-Alternate (TAKS-Alt)

Participation Requirements for TAKS-Alt

Students receiving special education services who have the most significant cognitive disabilities and are unable to participate in the other statewide assessments even with substantial accommodations and/or modifications will be assessed with TAKS-Alt.

Admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committees may decide that a student's knowledge and skills can best be assessed with TAKS-Alt if the student meets **all** of the following participation criteria.

The student

- **requires supports to access the general curriculum that may include assistance involving communication, response style, physical access, or daily living skills,**
- **requires direct, intensive, individualized instruction in a variety of settings to accomplish the acquisition, maintenance and generalization of skills,**
- **accesses and participates in the grade-level Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) through activities that focus on prerequisite skills,**
- **demonstrates knowledge and skills routinely in class by methods other than paper and pencil tasks, and**
- **demonstrates performance objectives that may include real life applications of the grade-level TEKS as appropriate to the student's abilities and needs.**