The Importance of Alternative Means to Express Proficiency in Graduation Requirements

Application to California Education Code and Other Statewide Initiatives for All California Constituents

Authors: Sara Doutre and Zach Smith

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Introduction

This brief elevates the need and requirement for alternative means to express proficiency in coursework requirements related to graduating with a standard diploma, particularly for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities face disparities in graduating with a regular diploma as California’s education system continues to look for improved ways to support this population’s path to graduation. Many students struggle to meet graduation requirements, even with significant investments in special education services. Alternative means of expression provide equitable opportunities for students with disabilities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These means promote inclusivity, accommodate diverse learning preferences, and tap into students’ unique strengths and talents.

California law mandates the establishment of alternative means of expression for students to complete their course of study, ensuring that all students have accessible pathways to graduation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Alternative means of expression do not in any way modify the standards and big ideas required for a course, and therefore, do not compromise the validity of assessing proficiency; instead, they allow students to showcase their abilities through modalities and mediums that align with their individual preferences, strengths and needs. Alternative means of expression are especially important for students with disabilities, who have federally protected individualized supplementary aids and services that are required to be embedded within instruction and learning environments for them to access the content. Alternative means of expression **should** **not** be misinterpreted as alternate standards. Alternate standards, such as the Core Content Connectors used in the development of the California Alternate Assessment (CAA), modify the breadth and depth of what students are required to learn and are reserved only for students with disabilities with the most complex needs. Students with disabilities are eligible for instruction aligned to these standards only if students’ individualized education program (IEP) teams have assessed that modified content, and therefore, alternate assessments to be appropriate for their needs. A state’s alternate assessments are intended for a limited number of students, as mandated by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which limits the percentage of students assessed using the CAAs to one percent of the total student population in the state.[[2]](#footnote-2) As an important note, a student’s eligibility for the CAA assessment (in the case of California) should not preclude educators from offering the student the opportunity to express their understanding of Big Ideas connected to graduation-based coursework through alternative means wherever and whenever possible.

The Need for Alternative Means to Express Proficiency in Grade-Level Standards

Students in California, including those with disabilities, must fulfill state and local educational agency requirements to earn a regular high school diploma. The California *Education Code* sets forth state minimum requirements for graduation, including 13 courses of preparation and “other coursework requirements adopted by the governing board of the school district.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Students with disabilities face disparities in meeting these coursework requirements and graduating with a regular diploma. In 2022, while the graduation rate for California students was 87.4 percent, only 75.2 percent of students with disabilities achieved this milestone (California School Dashboard 2024). Despite the tens of billions of dollars invested in special education services annually (Legislative Analyst’s Office 2019), many students remain unable to express proficiency in the standards necessary for graduation. While some students with disabilities may require more intensive support, other students’ needs from this population can be met through supplementary aids and services and specific annual goals. It is crucial to assess and provide individualized support based on the unique needs and abilities of each student with disabilities, with the expectation that most students can meet graduation requirements.

Students with disabilities may encounter challenges in traditional modes of expression, such as written or verbal communication, due to various disabilities, including physical, sensory, cognitive, or language-related impairments. Alternative means of expression offer equitable opportunities for these students to showcase their knowledge, skills, and understanding. By accommodating diverse learning preferences, alternative means of expression promote inclusivity, enabling students to actively participate in academic activities, classroom discussions, and assessments on an equal footing with their peers. Students with disabilities often possess unique strengths and talents that can be better demonstrated through different modes of expression. For example, rather than only expressing their understanding through writing, some students may benefit from spoken or visual forms of expression. By offering flexible and personalized options that maintain the rigor and success criteria of coursework, educators can tap into these strengths and enable students to demonstrate their understanding and skills in ways that align with their individual abilities.

California Law Requires Alternative Means

Each local educational agency (LEA) has the autonomy to choose whether to require additional coursework for graduation. Many LEAs adopt the University of California and the California State University coursework requirements, known as “A–G courses,” in addition to the state minimum requirements to ensure students are prepared for four-year college admissions. The *Education Code* mandates that each LEA must establish alternative means for all students to complete their course of study and earn a diploma:

The governing board, with the active involvement of parents, administrators, teachers, and pupils, shall adopt alternative means for pupils to complete the prescribed course of study that may include practical demonstration of skills and competencies, supervised work experience, or other outside school experience, career technical education classes offered in high schools, courses offered by regional occupational centers or programs, interdisciplinary study, independent study, and credit earned at a postsecondary educational institution. Requirements for graduation and specified alternative modes for completing the prescribed course of study shall be made available to pupils, parents, and the public.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For students with disabilities in grades 7–12, their IEP team must consider and document in their IEP “any alternative means and modes necessary for the pupil to complete the prescribed course of study of the district and to meet or exceed proficiency standards for graduation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) These considerations can apply to both summative and formative assessments depending on the student’s IEP-defined and documented needs and how progress is assessed within coursework needed for graduation. The IEP team can determine if a student would benefit from using alternative means to express proficiency in grade-level standards for graduation coursework, including for specific standards or courses.

Distinction Between Alternative Means of Expression and Alternate Standards

As stated above, it is important to differentiate between alternative means of expression and alternate standards. Many students with disabilities will utilize alternative means to express proficiency in grade-level standards. However, for a small number of students with significant disabilities requiring complex support needs, the IEP team may also consider eligibility for the CAA assessments based on these students’ need for content instruction that is outside their grade level or coursework requirements. However, eligibility to participate in the CAA does not negate a student’s need for alternative means of expression. IEP teams for a student with disabilities participating in the CAA should still consider whether the student could participate in and complete coursework using alternative means of expression, including elective coursework. Alternative means of expression may also be used for a student to demonstrate proficiency with alternate standards.

Validity of Alternative Means to Express Proficiency

Alternative means of expression do not compromise the validity of assessing proficiency in grade-level academic standards for graduation coursework. Instead, they offer students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities through different modalities and mediums that better suit their needs. The focus remains on assessing whether students have grasped the core concepts and skills required by the standards, regardless of the specific means of expression.

To ensure the validity of alternative means of expression, it is crucial to design them appropriately, align them with learning objectives, and ensure their consistency with the assessed standards. The authors of this brief recommend taking a backward design approach, where the standards and their corresponding success criteria are identified first, then teams collaborate on potential options for how these criteria are met through different communication mediums. By providing a range of valid and accessible options, educators can accurately evaluate student proficiency and promote fair and inclusive assessments.

Conclusion

The use of alternative means to express proficiency in grade-level standards is crucial for ensuring that students with disabilities have equal opportunities to achieve academic outcomes, including graduating with a diploma by meeting the state graduation requirements. By recognizing the challenges these students may face in traditional modes of expression, such as written or verbal communication, and providing alternative options, educators can empower students to actively engage in academic activities, discussions, and assessments. California law supports the implementation of alternative means of expression, allowing each LEA to establish pathways for students to complete their course of study and earn a diploma. It is important to remember that alternative means of expression are not a compromise but rather a valid and inclusive approach to assess students’ understanding of core concepts and skills. By designing appropriate and aligned alternative means of expression, educators can accurately evaluate student proficiency and foster a fair and inclusive educational environment.

References

California Legislature’s Nonpartisan Fiscal and Policy Advisor, Legislative Analyst’s Office. 2019. *Overview of Special Education in California*. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4110>

California School Dashboard. 2024. Academic Engagement. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2022/academic-engagement>

1. California *Education Code (EC)* Section 51225.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ESSA, 20 U.S.C. § 6311(b)(2)(D) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *EC* Section 51225.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *EC* Section 51225.3(b) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *EC* Section 56345(b)(1) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)