

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Questions and Answers
Standards of Learning (SOL) or Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)
Changes to the VAAP Guidelines

Question: How can we place students in the VAAP when they do NOT exhibit both significant cognitive impairments AND adaptive life skill deficits?

The current guideline reads:

The student demonstrates significant cognitive impairments and adaptive skills deficits that prevent completion of curriculum based on the Standards of Learning (SOL) even with program and testing accommodations.

Response: Guidelines for participation in the Alternate Assessment Program have been revised for 2002.

The new guideline reads:

The student demonstrates impairments that prevent completion of curriculum based on the Standards of Learning (SOL) even with program and testing accommodations.

Rationale: The main purpose of the VAAP is to serve students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the SOL curriculum. IEP committee members must decide if the student's impairment affects completion of curriculum based on the Standards of Learning (SOL) even with program and testing accommodations. **Program and testing accommodations** need to be considered carefully by committee members when applying this guideline. Committee members must remember that a student must qualify for **ALL CRITERIA IN THE PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES TO BE A CANDIDATE FOR THE VIRGINIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM.**

Question: My student is in the 3rd grade, but only 9 years old on September 30th. He is exempt from the VAAP due to his age, and should not take the SOL assessment. How can he be included in school summary reports? Those students that do not meet age requirements for VAAP should not count as exemptions because they are a part of the accountability system under the alternate assessment, but are simply not scheduled to be assessed yet.

The current guideline reads as follows:

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| Elementary I: | No later than the school year in which the student is eight years old on or before September 30. |
| Elementary II: | No later than the school year in which the student is ten years old on or before September 30. |

Middle School: No later than the school year in which the student is thirteen years old on or before September 30.
High School: One-year prior to the student's exit year.

Response: Guidelines for participation the Alternate Assessment Program for 2002 have been revised to reflect the same student grade level classifications as the SOL testing program. Students should be assessed at Grades 3, 5, 8 and 11. The original guidelines focused on student age levels including:

Elementary I: The school year in which the student is classified as a third grade student.
Elementary II: The school year in which the student is classified as a fifth grade student.
Middle School: The school year in which the student is classified as an eighth grade student.
High School: The school year in which the student is classified as an eleventh grade student.

Rationale: All students, including those with disabilities, are assigned to a grade level. To be congruent with the SOL testing program, students will participate in VAPP at grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. By assessing VAAP students at these grade levels, the situation will be avoided where a student is eligible for VAAP at a grade level different from his or her peers.

Question: If the student is taking SOL content on grade level and may or may not pass the SOL test, MUST he or she still take the SOL test?

Response: Yes

Rationale: The decision for a student to take an SOL tests should not be based on whether or not the student can pass the SOL test. If the student has access to the information in the content area being assessed, he or she should take the test for that content area.

Question: If I have four pictures of a student doing a task, are those four pictures considered four pieces of evidence?

Response: No

Rationale: There has been some confusion over what constitutes a “**piece**” of evidence. To clarify the issue, the terminology has been changed. What was formally a “**piece**” of evidence is now referred to as a “**type**” of evidence. Multiple photographs count as one “**type**” of evidence, multiple data sheets (same kind) count as one “**type**” of evidence, and so on. In the above example, the four photographs count as **one type of evidence**. The teacher must submit **three to five other types of evidence** to complete his/her entry. (At least one primary type of evidence is required, since photographs are considered secondary evidence.) (See the VAAP Manual for descriptions of various **types** of evidence.)

Question: Is the VAAP meant to assess functional academic curriculum and adaptive life skills or SOL content?

Response: VAAP students will be pursuing goals and objectives based on individualized needs and not necessarily SOL academic content.

Rationale: Students fitting the other guidelines of the Alternate Assessment should be taking the Alternate Assessment, AFTER the IEP team has considered participation in any or all SOL assessments. The student's IEP goals should be linked to the SOL academic areas of English, Math, Science, and History/Social Science.

Question: What about the student who is enrolled in the 8th grade and yet working on curriculum based on the 3rd or 4th grade SOL?

Response: The degree to which a student participates in the SOL curriculum is a decision of the IEP team. Similarly, the IEP team can decide if the student has been exposed to enough SOL material to participate in SOL testing.

Rationale: A grade 8 student working on grade 3 or 4 SOL content is, in all likelihood, not receiving instruction on the material that is assessed on the Grade 8 SOL test. Therefore, the student should be considered for participation in VAAP. This student's program should contain functional academics and adaptive life skill goals that relate to the student's current educational needs and future goals.

Question: What about the student who is only one grade level off content grade level?

Response: It is the IEP team's responsibility to decide whether or not a student in this situation participates in the SOL testing program. Team members must decide if the student was presented with sufficient SOL content to take the SOL test or if the student meets the criteria enough to participate in the VAAP. It would appear that a student in eighth grade working on grade 7 SOL content is most likely an SOL candidate since he or she has the ability to learn close to grade level material.

Rationale: The decision for a student to take an SOL test should not be based on whether or not the student can pass the test. Even an eighth grade student learning grade 8 SOL content, may have difficulty passing the grade 8 SOL test. The best approach is to explore a variety of instructional modifications to assist a borderline student in learning the grade level SOL. For students pursuing a Modified Standard Diploma, continued exposure to the SOL will better prepare the student to pass the grade 8 SOL assessments.

Question: What happens to students who receive an alert on the VAAP?

Response: Presently, students who take the alternate assessment and receive an alert suffer no penalty. Scores on these alerted entries are still included in school and division data.

Rationale: VAAP scores are alerted if the scorer believes the student's Collection of Evidence demonstrates ability beyond what would be expected of a VAAP participant at the grade level being assessed. It is the IEP team responsibility to determine the

appropriateness of VAAP for a student. If a scorer finds evidence of "too high" performance, the result will be an informational alert that recommends the IEP team revisit the guidelines and, hopefully, programming for the student in question. However, **the resulting score WILL be counted!**

Question: What about homebound and hospital bound students taking the Alternate Assessment?

Response: Students in a homebound or hospital situation are expected to participate in state assessments. Simply having a student in a homebound or hospital based situation is not sufficient to expect poor performance on his or her collection of evidence. Although opportunities for interaction with non-disabled peers and learning in natural environments may be limited with these students, instructors still have options for providing the proper context for instruction and peer interaction.

Rationale: The Alternate Assessment Program can serve as a positive means of examining programming for this population of students and still provide a fair and honest accounting of the student's current educational performance. Participation for students in these situations involves consideration for the nature of service delivery and the challenges instructors face when working with these students.

Question: I have a student who attends regular classes, but is only working on partial concepts of the SOL. He partially participates in the SOL with needed instructional concepts being guided by IEP goals and objectives. Which does he take?

Response: This depends on how the goals and objectives for the student are worded and included in instructional practice from the student's IEP. If the IEP team has the expectation that the student can participate in the general education setting for any percentage of instruction, the expectation should be for that student to take the SOL test for that course. If the IEP team is placing the student into the classroom for other reasons (socialization, normalization, etc.) than learning the course content, **and** providing the student with a different delivery model for instruction, he or she may be able take the VAAP upon meeting the other guidelines required for VAAP participation.

Rationale: If the IEP team has stated through goals and objectives that the entire content of a course is beyond the level of a student's ability, the student should be receiving instruction with modifications or accommodations to provide him or her with the specified IEP concepts. This student is a likely candidate for VAAP. Instruction in a modified curriculum may take place in a general education setting, but it will be different from the general delivery model! If an IEP team decides that a student will learn 25% or 50% of the SOL material in the general education classroom, this implies that the student in the SOL program. If the SOL curriculum is modified to present these percentages of instruction, and presented to in place of the general SOL curriculum the student may be eligible for the VAAP.

Survey Results

Background: The Department of Education distributed surveys to all of the State's superintendents' regions with the intent of addressing the issue of students who are generally referred to as "gray area" students. Respondents included special educators, department heads, superintendents and other interested parties. These surveys asked respondents to identify and describe students who, in their opinions, did not qualify for either the SOL examinations or the VAAP. An analysis of returned surveys revealed four categories of students:

1. Students who were clearly candidates for the SOL program with accommodations needed for instruction and testing.
2. Students who were clearly candidates for the VAAP.
3. Students who would qualify for the VAAP with an examination of student need concerning functional academics or adaptive life skills programming.
4. Students who fell into special circumstances that would require closer examination for inclusion into the assessment system of the Commonwealth of Virginia. (**PERCEIVED gray area students**)

Findings: Of 58 surveys returned and examined, only three cases appeared to qualify for category four, "gray area students".

Case Studies

Case Study One

"Suzi receives special education services in most classes she attends, however, she does participate in the regular classroom setting for History, Chemistry, Art and Child-Care. Suzi's reading and writing skills are so far below grade level that she was only required by IEP team decision to complete about 50% of the requirements of the SOL for her classes. She is currently in the 11th grade, but her reading and writing skills are on the 7th to 8th grade level. She receives some functional academics in Math class related to counting money, writing checks, etc. She also receives Life Skills training in the form of her child-care class and vocational class. I feel she does not fit the guidelines for participation in the SOL assessments or the VAAP."

Discussion: If Suzi is enrolled in these courses for credit, she is expected to take the SOL tests. The question to be addressed in Suzi's case is related to programming. Why is Suzi only expected to account for 50% of the SOL in History and Chemistry? What does 50% specifically mean? Does the student have separate content written to access 50% of the total course content? Who decides which concepts she is responsible for within the course? Why can't the expectation be to account for 100% of the content, with the understanding that this student needs additional support? Give her instruction in all of the SOL content for the course and examine any accommodations that may be required to assist with her understanding as much of the content as is possible. Accurate judgements cannot be made about the level or percentage of material presented in a class a student will understand and retain. These are the precise questions that an assessment helps answer for her instructors. What content did the student learn and retain? What percentage of the course was understood and interpreted? What level of understanding has our instructional delivery given to the student?

Case Study Two

"Pat attends Parker High School and is in the 12th grade. Before the Alternate Assessment was administered last year, this 19-year-old student wished to graduate with her peers. She received a Special Diploma during last year's graduation ceremony. After the summer, Pat and her parents decided to continue her education so that she might be able to gain skills in vocational and job training workshops. She also attends regular classes for socialization skills. Pat is not on grade level in any of her subjects and there is no expectation of her participating in curriculum based on the SOL. The question has arisen as to whether or not Pat needs to complete a VAAP assessment, given that service will end next year."

Discussion: Pat may return to school under Federal guidelines and participate in any SOL content that is appropriate and provided under her current IEP. Likewise, if she is exposed to content based on the SOL framework, she would be responsible for taking the SOL assessment relating to that content area. Further, if Pat is classified as an 11th grade student, and not participating in any SOL content courses, and meeting the guidelines for the VAAP, then she would be expected to participate in the VAAP.

Case Study Three

"Lamont is labeled as having learning disabilities and has several behavioral problems. He has been suspended from school on numerous occasions and, as such, has not been able to receive the level of SOL instruction needed to pass the exam. Lamont has received tutoring in math and English, but still performs poorly in both subjects. He has fewer SOL responsibilities while in his classes, but does attend the regular education setting with no accommodations. He is in the eighth grade and scheduled for the eighth grade SOL assessments, however his parents and the IEP team feel he has not been exposed to the content enough for him to pass the SOL tests in any area. Lamont does not meet the guidelines for participation in the VAAP, so he is not a candidate for the alternate assessment. But his level of participation and attendance in SOL classes is so low that chances of him passing are minimal and participation is questionable as to fairness in assessing him on material he has not seen."

Discussion: Lamont is probably considered to be a characteristic "gray" area student. Although he is attending classes related to the SOL, his expectations and attendance have left him ill prepared to participate in the SOL assessments. However, he had the opportunity to receive instruction in the SOL, should his behaviors and attendance have been better. He may also need accommodations that have yet to be explored by the IEP team. In any event, **Lamont would be expected to take the SOL test for each class he is attending.** As far as "fewer SOL responsibilities" is concerned, what is being instructed and expected of the student? Is there a parallel curriculum that has been developed to provide a lesser expectation or instructional delivery to Lamont? Similar to Case Study One, the expectation for Lamont should be complete SOL exposure and accountability. Therefore, he is not really a "gray area student".

Summary

Teachers were asked to submit descriptions of students they believed were not eligible for either the SOL assessment program or the VAAP. Under close examination of survey responses, the vast majority of students did fit into one program or the other. It became apparent that if an IEP team focused on a student's total programming needs, and developed an IEP that addressed all facets of those needs, the appropriate assessment was readily available in all but a few instances. In all likelihood, students working on lower grade level SOL than their grade classification would warrant, would **also** be receiving instruction in functional academics and adaptive life skills. Under these circumstances, most students would be VAAP candidates. Students pursuing a Modified Standard Diploma should receive required SOL instruction AND functional programming to meet their varied instructional needs. In all but a few instances, these students would be eligible for participation in the SOL assessment program.

In sum, all students can be accounted for using the current system of assessment in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The current assessment system serves as a means to raise the level of expectations for all students with disabilities to achieve all they are capable of achieving within our public school systems.

For information or answers to questions regarding participation guidelines or other issues related to the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program, contact either Nate Sparks at the Division of Assessment and Reporting at (804) 225-3026 (nsparks@mail.vak12ed.edu) or Sharon Siler, Office of Special Education at (804) 225-2711 (ssiler@mail.vak12ed.edu)