



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A Memo from the New Jersey Department of Education

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To:Local Educational Agency Leads

Route To:Bilingual/ESL Supervisors, District Testing Coordinators

From:Kathy Ehling, Assistant Commissioner

Division of Educational Services

Updates on WIDA Alternate Screener and Alternate ACCESS Exit Criteria

Providing meaningful access to learning for all students begins with accurately identifying their strengths and needs and ensuring the right supports are in place. The **WIDA Alternate Screener** (introduced July 1, 2025) provides schools with a paper-based English language proficiency assessment specifically designed for K–12 multilingual learners (MLs) with the most significant cognitive disabilities. By measuring students’ language skills in a way that reflects their unique needs, the screener helps educators make informed decisions about eligibility for Language Instruction Educational Programs (LIEPs) and ensures that students receive the appropriate resources they need to succeed.

The following outlines the purpose of the WIDA Alternate Screener, the background for its development, and how it is used to appropriately identify and support students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Purpose and Background

- Designed for students whose disabilities significantly impact intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, as documented in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).
- Provides an equitable alternative to the standard WIDA Screener, which may not accurately measure language skills for this population.
- Aligns with participation in Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) (grades 3–12) and Alternate ACCESS (grades K–12).

Eligibility Criteria

- Applies to K-12 students with the most significant cognitive disabilities; however, having an IEP or 504 plan alone does not automatically qualify a student for the WIDA Alternate Screener.
- For grades K-2, eligibility is determined collaboratively by ESL/Bilingual staff and the IEP team using the [Participation Decision Tree](#).
- For grades 3-12, eligibility is based on students who are expected to participate in the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) and the Alternate ACCESS.
- All eligibility decisions must be documented in the student’s record.

Identification Decisions

- Kindergarten, 1st semester: If the oral score is greater than 4.0, the student is not identified as an ML.
- Kindergarten, 2nd semester through Grade 12: If the overall composite score is less than or equal to 3.0, the student is identified as an ML.
- Students already identified with the standard WIDA Screener cannot be rescreened with the Alternate Screener.

The table below provides a comparison of the Standard WIDA Screener and the WIDA Alternate Screener to assist LEAs in determining which screener is appropriate for students based on their needs.

Standard WIDA Screener vs. WIDA Alternate Screener

Feature	Standard WIDA Screener	WIDA Alternate Screener
Format	Online/paper (depending on grade)	Paper-based only
Target Population	All potential MLs, grades K–12	Only MLs with the most significant cognitive disabilities (expected DLM/Alt ACCESS participants)

Feature	Standard WIDA Screener	WIDA Alternate Screener
Eligibility	All K–12 students who may be MLs and do not have significant cognitive disabilities MLs	Determined by ESL/Bilingual staff + IEP team
Domains Tested	Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (all grades, except limited domains for K1)	Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (Grades 1–12); K: Listening & Speaking in 1st semester
Administration	Standardized timing and order	Flexible: can be given in any order, across multiple days
Adaptations	Limited accommodations allowed	Booklets may be cut apart, manipulatives allowed, AAC devices permitted
Scoring	Scored through the WIDA platform	Scored locally by a test administrator using the WIDA Alternate Screener Score Calculator
Identification	Based on proficiency thresholds across domains	Based on simplified scoring scale (<3, 3, 4, 5)
Restrictions	Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (who qualify for Alternate ACCESS) should not be given the Standard WIDA Screener	Cannot be used if the student has already been identified with the standard WIDA Screener

Exiting an ML Student Assessed with the WIDA Alternate ACCESS Assessment

Following a statewide focus group review, new exit criteria are recommended for students assessed with the WIDA Alternate ACCESS. To exit an LIEP, students must:

- Achieve an **overall composite score of 3 or higher, and**
- Have an **English Language Observation Form – Modified for Alternate ACCESS**, indicating readiness to exit.

Contact Information

For questions, contact the Office of Supplemental Educational Programs at ML@doe.nj.gov.

c: Members, State Board of Education
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