July 2026

Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessment Guidelines

Purpose

These guidelines are intended to update educators, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams and administrators on the annual English language proficiency assessment requirements for students who are English learners (ELs) and have the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Introduction

The Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessment (Alt ELPA) is a standards-based English language proficiency (ELP) assessment for eligible English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The purpose of this assessment is to measure students' progress toward the attainment of English language proficiency in the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing and is based on the English Language Proficiency Standards for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities. The standards and the assessment address the academic English language skills students need to access and achieve grade-appropriate content taught in English.

Alt ELPA Participation Guidelines

English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities are:

- Students who are not proficient in the English language and have been identified as needing English language development services,
- Students who meet the federal definition of an English learner (ESEA §8101(20)), and
- Students whose Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams have determined an alternate assessment is appropriate for the student.

All English learners in grades K-12, including those with the most significant cognitive disabilities are required to participate in annual ELP testing. This includes:

- Students in grades K-2 whose IEP teams have determined that the student will participate in Iowa's Alternate Assessments (Early Literacy Alternate Assessment).
- Students in grades 3-11 whose IEP teams have determined that the student will participate in Iowa's Alternate Assessments (Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment and Early Literacy Alternate Assessment).
- Students in grade 12 whose IEP teams have determined that the student will participate in Iowa's Alternate Assessments.

Note: The general English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) is required for all students with IEPs not specifying eligibility for alternate assessments.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team

The IEP team will need to identify the student as meeting the participation criteria for alternate assessments on the Services+ portion of the IEP. The IEP team also determines that limited English proficiency is a special consideration addressed throughout the IEP. The IEP team should include someone who understands second language acquisition such as the EL teacher. Teams should also determine if the English learner status is a special factor in the development of the IEP.

In the Assessment section of the IEP, the team must determine if the student will take the alternate assessment with or without accommodations. If the student needs an accessibility feature for the Alt ELPA, it should be added in the text box under Alternate Assessment with Accommodations and noted that the specific accessibility feature is for the Alt ELPA.

Accessibility

The IEP team must indicate in the IEP any accessibility features that are required for the student to be able to access the Alt ELPA assessment. The IEP team should review the Alt ELPA Accessibility Manual to determine what accessibility options are available to the student on this assessment. Accessibility features must align with the supports that the student uses during classroom instruction and assessment and are allowable according to the Alt ELPA Accessibility Manual.

Prior to the development of the Alt ELPA, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities were required to take the general ELPA21 with accommodations, and in some cases, with domain exemptions. With a more accessible test available, the need for domain exemptions will be less likely. If an IEP team feels that a student will still not have access to a specific domain, even when taking the Alt ELPA, the district can use the unique accommodation process to request a domain exemption. The process for requesting a unique accommodation is found in the Statewide Assessment System Accessibility Manual.

Test Administrator Collaboration

English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities deserve the same opportunities as their peers to have their learning and progress measured. In the past, the general ELP assessment fell short as it was not designed to support students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and, as a result, segments of the test were often inaccessible. The Alt ELPA is a more accessible test that was developed to meet the needs of these students and support students' communication systems. Therefore, it is essential that English language teachers and special educators collaborate to ensure that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are English learners participate in the annual Alt ELPA with the necessary support as outlined in their IEPs. English language teachers and special educators each bring a unique skill set that when working together, creates conditions that allow the student to more fully participate and thereby be able to demonstrate their progress in learning English.

English Language Teachers:

- Understand ELP assessment requirements, how to navigate the testing platform, and will ensure all students are tested within the testing window.
- Serve as a resource to the IEP team in discussions surrounding the developmental nature of acquiring language and in the understanding of language differences vs disabilities.
- May serve as test administrator, lead scorer, or second scorer.
- Partner with the special educators to ensure the student's services are informed by the Alt ELP standards.
- Can help in the area of parent communication by:
    - helping to arrange for interpreters when necessary.
    - communicating about the test students will be taking.
    - providing help in understanding the scores.

Special Education Teachers:

- Determine eligibility for participating in alternate assessments, including the Alt ELPA through discussions with the IEP team.
- Ensure necessary wording is included in the IEP. If the student needs accessibility features, the accessibility features needed for the Alt ELPA assessment must be listed.
- May serve as test administrator, lead scorer, or second scorer.
- If necessary, provide assistance with the student's communication system.
- Ensure student accessibility supports are utilized during instruction and assessment.

Accessing the Testing Platform

The Alt ELPA testing system is accessed through the ELPA21 Portal. Cambium Assessment Inc. (CAI) is the platform that delivers all ELPA21 assessments. In order to access the ELPA21 Portal, test administrators (TAs) must first have a Role Assignment approved through the Iowa EdPortal. Once approved, TAs will be able to add students either by entering them into the system or by an upload as they do all other students taking ELPA21 assessments. TAs are able to access TIDE (student info system), the Operational Testing Administration system and the Reporting system for the students assigned to them. District Test Coordinators (DTCs) have access to all test functions and student data from the district. It is their responsibility to see that accessibility features and accommodations are marked and that the Alt ELPA option is selected for those who are eligible.

Alt ELPA Training

Prior to administering the Alt ELPA, a training course must be completed by the test administrator and the educator assisting with scoring. The Alt ELPA training course is available on the ELPA21 Portal. A certificate is to be downloaded upon completion and should be kept on file with the district test coordinator. See Required Student Assessments and Training for more information.

Test Administrator Local Scoring Protocol

Unlike the general ELPA21, the Alt ELPA requires that two educators work together to administer the assessment in grades K-12. Because there are some constructed response items in the speaking and writing domains that must be scored in person at the time of testing, two educators are necessary to rate the student's responses (separately, and then come to an agreement) according to a rubric. The requirement of two scorers ensures the reliability of the test. One will be assigned the role of Lead Scorer and the other will have the role of Second Scorer. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- One individual who is certificated by the state will be deemed the official Test Administrator (TA). This person will be assigned the correct ELPA21 role through the portal permissions approval process. This person will serve as either the Lead Scorer or the Second Scorer.
- The Lead Scorer must be familiar with the student's communication system whether that is augmentative and alternative communication, sign language, or other verbal or nonverbal communication modes.
- The Second Scorer will assist with the test administration and scoring.
- At least one of the educators must be someone with whom the student is familiar.
- Both educators must sign the test confidentiality agreement found in the State of Iowa Test Security Manual.
- Completed scoring worksheets shall be kept on file with the DTC and must be available upon request for the Iowa Department of Education to review as part of test monitoring.

Score Reporting

The Alt ELPA test results will be available in mid-May at the same time as the general ELPA21 reports are released.

Score reports for Alt ELPA are similar to the general ELPA21 Individual Score Reports (ISRs). They include an overall Proficiency Determination of Emerging, Progressing and Proficient. Like general ELPA21, individual domain levels of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are reported. While the general ELPA21 reports five levels specific to each domain, the Alt ELPA reports four levels. In addition, the report includes scores on Receptive (Reading and Listening) and Productive (Speaking and Writing) communication.

Exit Criteria

Like the general ELPA21, the Alt ELPA serves as the state's criteria in determining when a student exits the language instruction educational program. When students achieve a determination of Proficient on the Alt ELPA, they are expected to exit the special status. A proficient score indicates a change in EL status which must be updated on the student information system. The student then enters the two-year monitoring period.

Accountability

Like the general ELPA21, Alt ELPA testing results are reported to the state and the data is used to determine whether the students are making progress in learning English. The aggregated results for schools are reported each year on the Iowa School Performance Profiles.

Questions

If you have questions, contact the ELPA21 or alternate assessment state consultants.