

Every Student Counts: The Importance of Alternative Choice Ready Pathways in North Dakota

In North Dakota, the vision of education is clear: all students should graduate "Choice Ready," equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be successful in life, work, and further education. This vision includes students with significant cognitive disabilities who participate in the North Dakota Alternate Assessment (NDAA). Through the Alternate Choice Ready Guidance, the state ensures that students are not left out of meaningful postsecondary planning. North Dakota recognizes that every learner has value and contributes to our society.

Presuming Competence: A Foundational Belief

At the heart of Alternate Choice Ready is the principle of presuming competence. This means that students with significant cognitive disabilities can learn, achieve, and prepare for their adult lives. When given appropriate instruction, support, and opportunities, students rise to meet high expectations.

Why Alternate Choice Ready Pathways Matter

The Choice Ready accountability framework ensures equity. It measures readiness for all students, not just those on a traditional graduation track. Alternate pathways give students with significant cognitive disabilities a defined, attainable route to demonstrate readiness, preventing them from being excluded.

Pathways to Adult Success

The Alternate Choice Ready model provides three clear pathways for students with significant cognitive disabilities:

- **Post-Secondary Ready:** Preparing for continued education, vocational training, or college-level learning.
- **Workforce Ready:** Developing employability skills, job experience, and certifications to enter the workforce successfully.
- **Life Skills Ready:** Building independence, self-advocacy, and community engagement for a meaningful adult life.

These pathways ensure that graduation is not the end point but a springboard for future opportunities.

Students with Disabilities Enrich Society

North Dakota's approach reflects a broader truth: students with significant cognitive disabilities are valuable members of their communities. With meaningful, appropriate support, they can:

- Hold meaningful jobs, filling workforce needs and contributing to our economy.
- Participating in volunteering and civic life, building stronger communities.
- Live independently or with minimal support, independently making choices about their own lives.
- Model resilience and determination, inspiring all.

Moving Beyond Compliance to Purpose

Alternate Choice-Ready pathways are not just about meeting federal accountability requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). They are about affirming the dignity, potential, and societal value of every North Dakota student. This approach challenges old misconceptions about what students with significant cognitive disabilities can achieve.

By embedding presumption of competence, individualized planning, and equity into the system, North Dakota sends a powerful message:

Every student is capable of learning. Every student has a future. Every student counts.

Conclusion

The Alternate Choice-Ready Guidance matters! It opens doors to learning, opportunity, employment, independence, and full community participation. It reflects a commitment to high expectations and equitable opportunities, ensuring that students with significant cognitive disabilities are not just educated but also prepared for adult life, ending their educational career choice ready.

When we believe in every student's potential, provide them with the necessary support, and measure their success meaningfully and accurately, we help build a stronger, more inclusive North Dakota, one graduate at a time.