

# *Tips from the Special Education Division: Ensuring Appropriate Student Participation in the WA-AIM*

**October 2026**

**Question: How can districts and IEP teams ensure students are appropriately identified to participate in the WA-AIM?**

## **Answer:**

The WA-AIM is Washington's alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards and is intended only for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who cannot participate in the regular assessment, even with appropriate accommodations, as determined by the student's IEP team and documented in their IEP.<sup>1</sup> The decision for a student to participate in the WA-AIM is made by the student's IEP team and must be based on the individual student's needs and the Alternate Assessment Participation Descriptors outlined in [Guidelines for Statewide Accountability Assessments](#). If the student does not meet the eligibility criteria outlined, then the student will test on the regular assessment.

This criteria includes, but is not limited to, having a documented cognitive disability that affects intellectual functioning, with scores of at least two standard deviations below the mean on standardized, norm-referenced assessments of both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. The student must also meet the other WA-AIM participation criteria; no single factor or disability category should be used in isolation to determine participation.

Students eligible for special education under **Specific Learning Disability (SLD)**, **Emotional/Behavioral Disability (EBD)**, or **Communication Disorders (CD)** would generally not be expected to meet the significant cognitive disability criteria required for WA-AIM participation. 

Because the first WA-AIM participation criterion requires a documented cognitive disability affecting intellectual potential, participation may also be uncommon for students eligible for special education services under:

- Deafness/Hard of Hearing
- Visual Impairment

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<sup>1</sup> [WAC 392-172A-03090](#)



- Orthopedic Impairment,
- Other Health Impairment.

When a student eligible under one of these categories is identified to participate in the WA-AIM, districts should carefully review the student's evaluation and IEP documentation to ensure the student meets all WA-AIM participation criteria. Assessment participation must be an individualized IEP team decision and should not be based solely on disability category, placement, anticipated performance on the general assessment, or graduation needs. Participation in the WA-AIM also does not determine a student's placement or access to the general education environment.<sup>2</sup>



Figure three on page 15 of [Guidelines for Statewide Accountability Assessments](#) includes a helpful flow chart to guide IEP teams in making alternate Assessment participation decisions in alignment with the required participation descriptors.

## Reviewing WA-AIM Participation Decisions

Districts can support accurate WA-AIM participation decisions by establishing a review process to:

- **Review participation annually.** IEP teams should review the student's current evaluation information, present levels of performance, intellectual and adaptive functioning, instructional needs, and the WA-AIM participation criteria.
- **Review transfer records.** When a student transfers with an IEP identifying the WA-AIM as the student's statewide assessment, districts should review the student's evaluation, IEP, assessment history, and supporting documentation to ensure accurate IEP information and continued alignment with WA-AIM participation criteria.
- **Establish a secondary review process.** Districts may consider an additional review when a student's assessment participation appears inconsistent with the WA-AIM participation criteria or other information contained in the student's evaluation and IEP. This review should support, rather than replace, the individualized decision of the IEP team.
- **Review first-time WA-AIM identification in high school.** When a student is identified to participate in the WA-AIM for the first time in grades 10 or 11, districts should consider an additional review of the student's evaluation, IEP, assessment history, and instructional program to ensure the student meets the WA-AIM participation criteria and to understand why the student's assessment pathway changed.



**Remember:** The purpose of reviewing WA-AIM participation is not to reduce participation simply to meet the 1% threshold. The purpose is to ensure that each student participating in the WA-AIM is appropriately identified and meets the participation criteria.

<sup>2</sup> [WAC 392-172A-01035\(2\)\(e\)](#); [WAC 392-172A-03090](#).

## Reminders for WA-AIM Identification Practices and Graduation Planning

WA-AIM participation and graduation planning are related but distinct IEP team considerations.

A student must participate in the WA-AIM only when the student meets Washington's WA-AIM participation criteria. When a student is appropriately participating in the WA-AIM assessment, the IEP team may also determine that the student will use the WA-AIM to fulfill the graduation pathway requirement towards a regular high school diploma. **It is not appropriate to change a student's testing pathway from Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA) to WA-AIM based on concerns around expected performance or graduation pathway completion.**

Graduating with a regular high school diploma is an important indicator of postsecondary preparation and readiness for the next steps after high school. To support all students in demonstrating postsecondary readiness for their next steps and making progress toward earning a regular high school diploma, districts and IEP teams should:

- **Begin graduation planning early and individualize planning throughout secondary school.** Graduation planning should reflect each student's individual strengths, needs, and post-secondary goals, and be reviewed regularly as those goals evolve.
- **Provide access to inclusive, grade-level instruction and appropriate supports.** Students should have access to specially designed instruction, accommodations, services, and other individualized supports needed to make progress toward graduation.
- **Coordinate academic, graduation, and transition planning.** IEP teams should align the student's course of study, specially designed instruction, transition services, accommodations and supports, assessment participation, and graduation pathway with the student's strengths, needs, and post-secondary goals.
- **Review and respond when a student is not on track to meet graduation requirements.** The IEP team should review the student's program and determine what additional instruction, services, supports, opportunities, or additional time may be needed to support continued progress toward a regular high school diploma and meaningful postsecondary outcomes.