# Frequently Asked Questions for Parents: Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) Participation Decision-Making Tool

1. **What is the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP)?**

The VAAP is an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards. It is specifically designed to evaluate the achievement of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 3-8 and high school and in the content areas of reading, math, and science.

1. **What does the term “most significant cognitive disabilities” mean?**

“Significant cognitive disability” is not a disability category under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). Identifying a significant cognitive disability is not solely determined by an IQ test score, nor based on a specific disability category, but rather on a holistic understanding of the complex needs of the student.

1. **Why does it matter which students participate in the VAAP?**

There are significant short- and long-term implications for students who participate in the VAAP. Therefore, it is essential that the appropriate students are taking the VAAP. These implications include:

* Instruction received is less in depth, breadth, and complexity than the instruction based on the full Standards of Learning (SOL) that other students receive.
* Student most likely will not meet the requirements for the Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma.
* Student may not be eligible for some post-secondary training institutions, military service, financial aid, or jobs.

1. **If my child does not participate in the VAAP, are they still eligible to graduate with an Applied Studies Diploma?**

Yes. Students do not have to participate in the VAAP in order to receive an Applied Studies Diploma. There is no assessment tied to the Applied Studies Diploma. The only requirement for this diploma is to complete the requirements of their Individualized Education Program (IEP), and do not meet the requirements for a Standard or Advanced Studies diploma.

1. **Have the criteria for participation in the VAAP changed?**

No. The VAAP Participation Criteria has not changed; only the form has changed. The [VAAP Participation Decision-Making Tool](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/51942) was developed to support deeper discussion and more informed decision-making.

1. **How often does the new VAAP Participation Decision-Making Tool have to be reviewed and completed by IEP Teams?**

The IEP Team must complete this tool every school year that a student with an IEP would participate in the state’s general assessment (SOL) or prior to a student participating in the VAAP. This includes students entering third grade (which is the year that SOL assessments begin) and every year from Grades 3-8 and high school.

1. **What does the new form look like?**

The new VAAP Participation Decision-Making Tool is organized into the following four sections:

* Section A: Determining Initial Eligibility
* Section B: Determining the Most Significant Cognitive Disability
* Section C: Determining if the Student Requires Extensive, Direct, Individualized Instruction Aligned to Virginia’s Essentialized Standards of Learning (VESOL) and Substantial Support to Achieve Measurable Gains in the Grade- and Age-Appropriate Curriculum
* Section D: Additional Considerations

There is also a Decision Summary and a section for IEP Team signatures; signatures are to acknowledge that they were a part of the decision.

1. **Who makes the decision as to what state assessment a student participates in?**

The IEP Team makes the decision about which state assessment a student takes. In order to participate in the VAAP, a student must meet all participation criteria within the VAAP Participation Decision-Making Tool.

1. **Can the IEP Team or a parent opt a student out of state testing?**

No. In Virginia, there is no opt-out option. The IEP Team cannot make decisions for nonparticipation in state assessments. If a parent/guardian requests that a student not participate in one or more state assessments, then the IEP Team must convene to explain the consequences associated with nonparticipation. If the parent/guardian decides on nonparticipation in one or more state assessments, the decision will be considered a refusal to participate and the student will receive a score of ‘0’ (zero) for each test that is refused. Documentation indicating the consequences of not participating must be fully explained to and understood by the parent/guardian, or surrogate, and the student. This documentation must be attached to or become part of the student’s IEP. Refer to the [Participation in the Virginia Assessment Program: A Resource for Educators and Parents of Students with Disabilities.](https://www.doe.virginia.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/20358)

1. **What does presuming competence mean?**

In the Decision-Making Tool, presuming competence means that, in the absence of a clear choice between two rows, it is more beneficial to the student to assume the student can do more rather than less.

1. **What happens if my child has participated in the VAAP in the past but is no longer eligible?**

If this is the case, the IEP Team will need to meet to make sure the student has access to the general curriculum and receives appropriate instruction for the SOL assessments. The IEP Teams will need to examine what supports are already in place and what supports the student may need in order to gain access to the general curriculum and receive appropriate instruction in the content area.

The IEP Team can consider:

1. Does the student need assistive technology to assist with access and appropriate instruction?
2. What needs does the student have?
3. What are the current gaps in their learning?
4. What supports or further supports are needed in order to close those gaps?
5. What goals do the student and family have for the student’s future   
   (e.g., going to college, trade school, working, and living in the community)?

Please note: This is not an exhaustive list of factors that can be considered and addressed by the IEP Team when transitioning your child from participating in the VAAP and a modified curriculum to the SOL assessments and the general curriculum.