

**Florida Department of Education  
Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services**

**GUIDANCE DOCUMENT:  
SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES**

**This document has been prepared in an effort to provide individual educational plan (IEP) teams with additional guidance in their decision making related to the question, “Does the student have a significant cognitive disability?”**

Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states have the flexibility to count the proficiency of students with significant cognitive disabilities who take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, as long as the number of proficient scores does not exceed one percent of all tested students. A history of poor performance on state assessments and/or deficient reading scores in and of itself does not necessarily qualify a student as having a significant cognitive disability. The group of students referred to in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) as having “significant cognitive disabilities” are those students who face the most profound and complex learning challenges, and they constitute less than one percent of the student population (Gong & Marion, 2006).

Florida has a standards-driven system for all students. As such, the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards/Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards Access Points drive the curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment. In making the decision that a student will receive instruction in access points, IEP teams must review and discuss a variety of sources of information. Because reliance on **intelligence quotient (IQ) scores alone is not sufficient**, IEP teams should review the information available regarding the student for evidence of a significant cognitive disability. Such information includes:

- Psychological assessments
- Achievement test data
- Previous statewide assessment and district-wide test scores
- Aptitude tests
- Observations
- Attendance records
- Medical records
- Mental health assessments
- Adaptive behavior assessments
- Language assessments
- Curricular content
- School history
- Student response to instruction/intervention

In the IEP team’s discussion of the question, “Does the student have significant cognitive disabilities?” all of the information should be considered collectively. The student’s IQ score is but one piece of the data puzzle. The focal point for discussion should be on the impact of the student’s cognitive disability; to qualify as a student with “significant cognitive disabilities,” that impact should affect all aspects of the student’s academic, independent functioning, community living, leisure, and vocational activities.

Gong, B. & Marion, S. (2006). *Dealing with Flexibility in Assessments for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities*. National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, Inc.

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