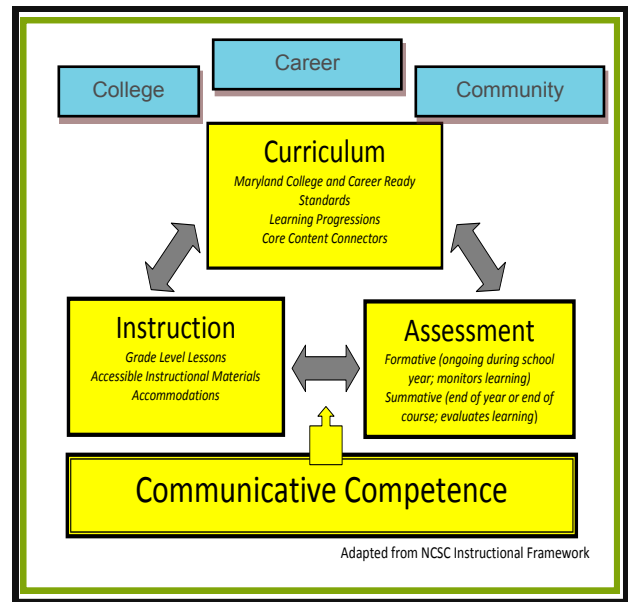# Unpacking the Alternate Instructional Framework

The alternate instructional framework (right) uses a triangle to illustrate three key interconnected parts: **curriculum, instruction,** and **assessment.** At the base of the triangle is **Communicative Competence**, a set of behaviors that students must have to communicate what they know and to get their needs met. At the top of the triangle, three post-secondary options crown the framework as goals for all students: **college, career,** and **community.**

Students who attend public schools have the opportunity to learn to read and write, solve mathematics problems, and utilize their academic skills across all content areas. Federal guidance requires that students with disabilities have the same opportunities and are exposed to the same curriculum as their general education peers.

College Career Community

Curriculum
Maryland College and Career Ready Standards
Learning Progressions
Core Content Connectors

Instruction
Grade Level Lessons
Accessible Instructional Materials
Accommodations

Assessment
Formative (ongoing during school year; monitors learning)
Summative (end of year or end of course; evaluates learning)

Communicative Competence

Adapted from NCSC Instructional Framework

What is meant by "the same curriculum for all students?"

For students with significant cognitive disabilities, **the academic content is aligned to the chronologically age-appropriate** grade-level content standards at a less complex performance expectation. This alternate instructional content matches the general education curriculum but varies in the depth, breadth, or complexity of the learning outcomes. In other words, the instructional content is the same but the performance expectations are less.

For example, in a third grade mathematics class, the students would organize data provided to them to create a simple line graph while the general education students would collect, organize, and analyze the data to create a graph which illustrates their findings. Despite differing academic rigor, the content is the same because the students are doing the same general activity that addresses the content standard.

Featuring:

- Unpacking the Instructional Framework
- Communicative Competence
- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Assessment
- Resources

Real World Learning

Skills of daily living can be incorporated into instruction rather than having them exist as a supplement to instruction. In English/language arts, students locate information in a newspaper or conduct an internet search. Through mathematics, students gain skills by shopping for groceries, cooking a meal, or negotiating a map. Experiences in science and social studies classes may lead to lifelong hobbies or careers. Practice with social skills can be embedded throughout the student's day in all content areas. With improved skills, students with significant cognitive disabilities have increased opportunities for achieving post-secondary outcomes in college, career, and community.

When given the opportunity, all students can learn, including those students who have significant cognitive disabilities.

Imagine living in a world where sounds surround you. You are able to grasp the meaning of some of the 'words.' You have a sense of the expectation that you will convey some important information back to those who care for you. You don't understand why when you make a certain sound, you don't get the hug you are asking for or when you lean toward the table when walking by, you aren't getting something to eat. Communication should be identifiable for all students regardless of their functional level. This recognition is the starting point for developing

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE.

In order to address communicative competence, there must be a commonly understood definition of communication. Communication involves both the ability to understand what is heard (*receptive*) and "what I want to tell someone" (*expressive*). Students with significant cognitive disabilities often understand much more than they can express. A focus on communicative competence ensures that we learn to "read" our students and not underestimate their understanding or expressive attempts.

The first component of the equation is **INTENT** or function. We must determine whether the student is trying to request or refuse, or trying to ask or answer a question. Once the student has a reason to communicate, they will typically demonstrate the intent to communicate. The way a student communicates is referred to as the **MODE** or form of expression. There are endless forms that communication behaviors may take. Some are verbalization, speech, manual signs, clear gestures or facial expressions. Some students, however, may not be able to use such modes and their means of communication may be unique.   This may mean that their mode of communication has not developed enough for the listener to understand their intent.

The listener has been mentioned a number of times. If the listener is observant and recognizes information then they are reinforcing the student's attempts and providing an avenue for success. This is called **Listener Comprehension.** If the Intent/Reason, Mode/Method, and Listener Comprehension criteria are met, then the student will have **successful communication!**
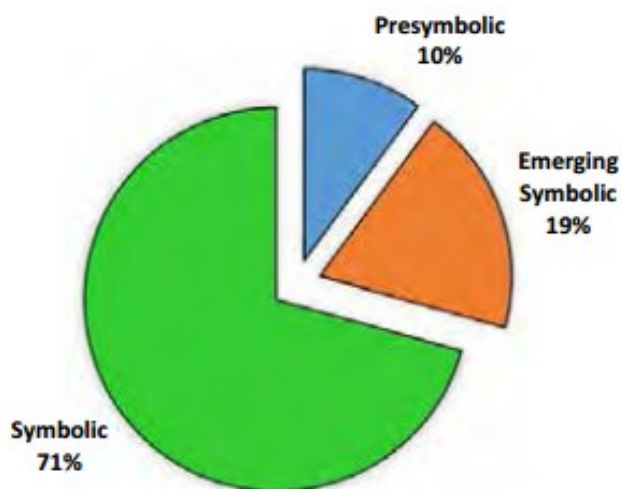
No more fundamental outcome of education exists for students than the right and ability to communicate what they know.

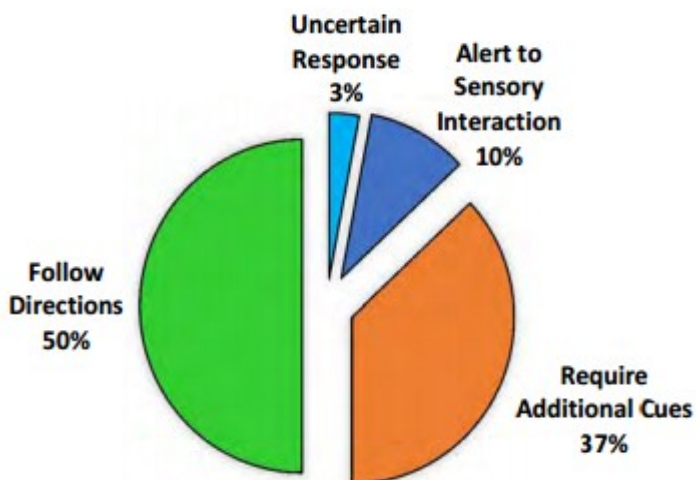## Communication serves as the foundation for access to curriculum.

Communicative Competence is at the base of the alternate instructional framework as shown on page one. When students are able to show us what they know and have learned, their mode of communication is **consistent, meaningful, and reliable** enough for the listener to understand. Therefore, it is crucial for each IEP team to work toward developing a student's functional and interactive communication system through **persistent and consistent interventions** that are used across their daily settings. We know from experience that for some students with complex communication needs, the use of Augmentative and Alternate Communication (AAC) supports provide a "bridge" while supporting them to develop functional speech. For others, the use of AAC is the alternative mode that maximizes their access to the community and the world of learning.

Studies show that about 70% of students with significant cognitive disabilities have symbolic expressive and receptive communication skills. Only about 3% have uncertain responses to stimuli; and an additional approximately 9% alert to or respond to stimuli in their environment (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1. Expressive Communication of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Presymbolic 10%
Emerging Symbolic 19%
Symbolic 71%

Figure 2. Receptive Communication of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Uncertain Response 3%
Alert to Sensory Interaction 10%
Follow Directions 50%
Require Additional Cues 37%

Source: Kearns, J. F., Kleinert, H. L., Kleinert, J. O., & TowlesReeves, E. A. Learner characteristics inventory. Lexington, KY: National Alternate Assessment Center. Percentages shown here are the percentages based on teachers who responded.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication

AAC

Communication is an essential life skill and an essential building block for the development of language. It is required for access to curriculum and instruction and is a basic human need and right. With access to a means of effective communication, all students can interact and exchange information with others, develop relationships, and participate fully in society.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) strategies include all forms of communication with the exception of oral speech. Imagine a time when you attended a football game in a noisy stadium. You wanted to order something to eat from the vendor but it was too noisy to use speech to communicate your request. You may have waved your hand to get the vendor's attention and then made a gesture with your hands indicating how many items you wanted. Whenever the ability to use speech in a functional manner is impacted, an alternative form of communication is required.

Developing an appropriate means of communication eliminates the need to consider prerequisite skills and offers a functional mode of communication that matches the student's current skill set and needs. AAC aids and devices such as picture and symbol communication displays or speech generating devices allow the user to use objects, picture symbols, letters, and/or words and phrases to create messages. Recommending an AAC system for a student requires a team approach and should include the speech language pathologist and/or assistive technology staff to identify the most appropriate communication intervention.

Typically, students with complex communication needs use a range of AAC systems and access methods to communicate in a variety of communication situations. For example, a student may use a speech generating device such as a tablet to participate in a classroom discussion. The same student may use a communication book when chatting with friends. Students relying on eye gaze to communicate may use an electronic device to participate in instruction and at home may utilize a non-electronic visual display to communicate.

Anyone, regardless of age, developmental or cognitive level, physical disability, language level, or sensory impairment, who lacks intelligible speech (whether temporary or long-term) will benefit from using AAC. Furthermore, using AAC does not interfere with a student's ability to learn to speak. In fact, for some students, using AAC may facilitate their development of speech and language as they hear words over and over.

How do students show what they know? Through assessment!

Ms. Jones is a middle school teacher looking for ways to see if her students are learning the material taught to them. She wants to compare their performance to other students in the district but also wants to have a sense of what each student has mastered. This can be accomplished in a number of ways through assessment.
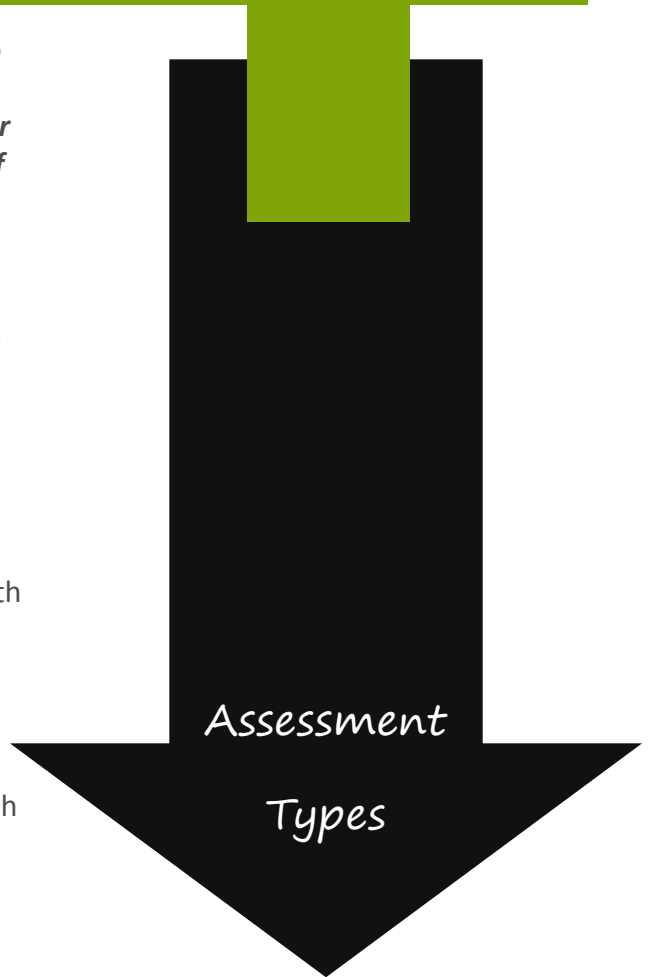
Assessment is the process of analyzing student work to make educational decisions. Teachers assess students to develop or adjust instructional strategies. Having an accurate picture of a student's skills and knowledge ensures that instruction leads to and supports higher achievement.

There are two major types and goals of assessment: assessment **for** learning and assessment **of** learning. Both types of assessment are important for determining the effectiveness of instruction and student progress.

Assessment for learning supports the student learning and improving skills; it is a snapshot of a student's current level of performance. It provides the teacher with information and data on the "next steps" to promote learning and progress. Assessment for learning is ongoing and may include teacher-made tests, drills, quizzes, or observations.

Assessment of learning focuses on student achievement. It compares assessment results with curricular and instructional targets. This type of assessment is often summative, given at the end of course work, school year, or other predetermined times. Assessment of learning ensures accountability of teachers, schools and districts.

Assessments can be **formal** or **informal**. **Formal** assessments, or **standardized** tests, have a set of expectations for all students who are taking the test including the questions and the manner in which the test is administered. There are specific criteria used for scoring and interpreting the scores. The goal of a formal assessment is to compare students with a larger group of students from within the same classroom, school, district, state, or country. Formal assessments are usually assessments **of learning.**

Assessment Types

Assessment for Learning

Assessment of Learning

Formal

Informal

Summative

Formative

Informal assessments are used to measure how well a student is able to understand and remember specific content and their progress in the curriculum. Informal assessments can be individualized to meet the needs of the student. The information and data gleaned from an informal assessment provides the teacher with feedback that can be used to adapt teaching. Informal assessments are assessments **for learning**.

Assessments can be **formative** or **summative**. **Formative** assessments are used to monitor student learning and provide feedback to the teacher to adapt or modify instruction to improve student learning. **Formative** assessment is ongoing throughout instruction and may come in the form of asking students to orally summarize text, answer questions on a drill, or complete a graphic organizer to demonstrate their understanding of a topic. **Formative** assessments are **informal** and are assessments for learning.

Summative assessments are used to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit or school year. The results of summative assessments are compared against standards or benchmarks and can be **formal** or **informal** assessments. They are assessments **of learning** and may be a mid-term or final exam, a final project, or statewide assessment.

The importance of assessment is illustrated in the alternate instructional framework on page one. It describes the interdependency of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The arrows are multi-directional because each component of the triangle is used to inform the other components. In other words, curriculum informs instruction; instruction informs assessment; assessment informs instruction, and so on. A good educational system uses assessment information to make changes to the curriculum, instruction, and assessment framework.

Assessing students is important for Ms. Jones because the results will yield important information that she can use to improve instruction so that the performance of her students is improved. She can use a variety of informal formative assessments to guide daily instruction and formal summative assessments to ensure her students are meeting curricular benchmarks.

The **Multi-State Alternate Assessment** is a summative standardized assessment in English/ language arts and mathematics administered at the end of the school year.

Preparing for the Multi–State Alternate Assessment

PRE Assessment of student readiness:

1. Utilize the **Learner Characteristics Inventory** (LCI) early in the school year to identify students who may not be able to participate in the assessment due to not having a consistent, reliable, and observable mode of communication (communicative competence).   A copy of the LCI is available here: http://www.ncscpartners.org/Media/Default/PDFs/LCI-Project-Report-08-21-12.pdf

2. Utilize the **Communication Matrix** to identify areas of need. The Communication Matrix is a free assessment tool created to help families and professionals easily understand the communication status, progress, and unique needs of anyone functioning at the early stages of communication or using forms of communication other than speaking or writing. You can find more information about using the Communication Matrix here: www.communicationmatrix.org

3. Utilize components of the **Student Response Check** (SRC) to conduct ongoing assessment of the modes of communication the student uses in instruction.   The SRC is a 3-question content-neutral task during which a student is asked to demonstrate their preferred mode(s) of communication. There are two ways that the SRC can be conducted: (1) using the computer or (2) using a paper version of the questions. The student is given a task and asked to respond using each of the following response modes:

    ⇒ Using the mouse to select an answer

    ⇒ Verbalizing the answer

    ⇒ Gesturing or pointing to the answer

    ⇒ Using assistive technology (AT) to indicate the answer

    ⇒ Using an eye gaze chart to select the answer

    ⇒ Circling or marking the answers on a paper copy

4. Administer **sample items** of the MSAA assessment throughout the school year to familiarize students with the testing process. Sample items can be found here:
    https://www.msaaassessment.org/tap/sample-items

CONSIDERATIONS:

Appropriateness of IEP goals and objectives related to communicative competence.

Student strengths and weaknesses and any barriers to participating in instruction and assessment.

Nature and need of professional development related to communicative competence. The Communication Tool Kit on the NCSC wiki is an excellent source of information:
https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Communication_Tool_Kit

Data related to communication in the LCI and Communication Matrix.

Specific implications and intervention recommendations and solutions for students who are at an EMERGING or PRE-SYMBOLIC level of EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION.

Use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems

Recommendations for students who do not alert to others or demonstrate an uncertain response to sensory stimuli.

The **Early Stopping Rule** is applied when the student does not display a consistent, reliable, and observable response mode.

Immediately Prior to the MSAA Assessment:

1. Conduct the SRC.
2. Document that the student has no observable response mode.
3. Administer the first 4 questions of one of the content areas (**the student does not have to answer the items correctly**).
4. Close Test if no observable response mode (The test may only be closed by the State Testing Coordinator and not the Test Administrator ensures that the procedure has been followed).
5. Next Steps: Complete the NCSC Communication Toolkit Training https://learn.hdi.uky.edu/ to learn more about communicative competence. Does the district have access to a specialist who can help to put a plan in place to address communicative competence?
6. Put specific interventions in place that address communicative competence.
7. Consider IEP goals that address student communication needs.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

Pre-Symbolic Communication refers to communication that does not have shared meaning for others because it does not use symbols such as words or signs. The use of body movements, cries, and facial expressions that must be interpreted by caregivers are examples of pre-symbolic communication.

Emerging Symbolic Communication uses pictures, signs, and gestures to communicate a variety of intents expressively.

Symbolic Communication refers to communication that involves a shared message between the sender and receiver. Examples include speech, sign language, writing (print or braille), picture and/or tactile communication systems.

Expressive Communication encompasses the many ways of conveying a message. These include oral speech, body movements, facial expressions, signs, or use of augmentative or alternative communication (AAC); including pictures, switch devices, and words.

Receptive Communication is the ability to understand or comprehend language that is heard or read.

Response Mode is the specific behavior used by an individual to communicate. Examples include conventional forms such as print, sign, speech, and graphic symbols; or unconventional forms such as vocal output, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body movement.

Observable Response Mode: a predictable and consistent behavior or movement that is able to be understood by a communication partner as intentional communication (modalities may include use of eye-gaze, reliable gestures, sign language, partner-assisted scanning, scanning on a device, direct-selection from an array of choices, activation of a voice-output device, use of a speech-generating device, or use of other reliable means):
⇒ demonstrating the intent toward the task
⇒ responding or sharing information about the stimulus (test item)

Assigning meaning to habitual or uncontrollable motor movement or vocalization without communicative intent are not considered response modes.