Making Accessibility Decisions for ALL Students

Recent reforms in educational testing have brought many changes in approaches to accessibility and accommodations. These new approaches provide an opportunity for students who may not have received accommodations in the past to now benefit from needed accessibility features that are built into the testing platform.

The purpose of this Brief is to describe a seven-step process that can be used to make accessibility decisions for all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), ELLs with disabilities, and students without an identified disability or ELL status.

For students with documented needs, educators are now asked to use technology-based tools, such as a Personal Needs Profile (PNP) or an Individual Student Assessment Accessibility Profile (ISAAP) to indicate the assessment's accessibility features that should be provided for them. A challenge for educators is making appropriate decisions about assigning these newly available accessibility tools to a large number of students, while at the same time balancing the need for individualized decision making and efficiency.

This Brief is for states to use as they organize their professional development for educators who will be making accessibility decisions for their students. It is also for educators seeking information on how to make optimal decisions about which accessibility tools and accommodations individual students need.

Step 1. Learn about the accessibility tools available for all students.

With new changes in assessments have come changes in the

About this Brief

This Brief presents information on steps to take in the transition from a focus on making decisions about accommodations for students with disabilities and ELLs, to a focus on decisions about accessibility and accommodations required by the new assessment approaches of states and collaboratives of states. These new approaches include making decisions for students without an identified disability or ELL status. Seven steps are highlighted that will be useful for states in organizing professional development for educators who will be making accessibility decisions, and for educators themselves who are seeking information on making optimal decisions about accessibility tools and accommodations that meet individual student needs.

This and other Briefs in this series address the opportunities, resources, and challenges that states and cross-state collaboratives face as they include all students, including students with disabilities, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities in assessment systems. Topics in this series (e.g., accommodations, participation) are intended to support a dialogue grounded in research-based evidence on building inclusive assessment systems. Each Brief provides an overview and discussion of issues, as well as insights into potential next steps and additional data needs for decision making.

terminology of accessibility. In the past the focus was almost entirely on accommodations. Now, consortia and states are referring to *levels of accessibility.*

Most common is a three-level framework. One level includes features available to all students taking the assessment. Another level includes features that must be designated by an educator prior to the assessment. These features are available to any student for whom the features are designated in advance, including, students with disabilities, ELLs, and students who do not have disabilities and are not ELLs. The third level typically is accommodations that are limited to students with disabilities, or in some cases, also to ELLs. Administrators and educators alike should know the accessibility framework and the tools available within it.

Learning about available accessibility features and accommodations is an important first step in making good decisions about accessibility and accommodations. It is also important for educators to learn the policies guiding their use.

Most educators are in states that belong to more than one consortium, or in which different assessments have different accessibility frameworks and accommodation policies. Laying the frameworks and policies side-by-side can support the learning of the frameworks and policies.

Table 1 summarizes the accessibility and accommodations frameworks of the general assessment, English language proficiency assessment, and alternate assessment consortia.

Table 1. Accessibility and Accommodations Frameworks of the Assessment Consortia

| Assessment | Accessibility Framework | | |
	For All Participating Students	*For Some Students With Educator Input*	*For Few Students With Documented Needs*
General Assessment[a]			
PARCC	Features for All Students	Accessibility Features Identified in Advance	Accommodations
Smarter Balanced	Universal Tools	Designated Supports	Accommodations
ELP Assessment[b]			
ELPA21	Universal Features	Designated Features	Accommodations
WIDA-ASSETS			Accommodations
Alternate Assessment[c]			
DLM	Supports Provided Within DLM via PNP	Supports Requiring Additional Tools/ Materials	Supports Provided Outside the DLM System
NCSC	Optimal Testing Conditions	Accessibility Features	Test Accommodations

[a] General Assessment Consortia: PARCC – Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers; Smarter Balanced – Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.
[b] English Language Proficiency (ELP) Assessment Consortia: ELPA21 – English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century; WIDA-ASSETS – World Class Instruction – Assessment Services Supporting ELs through Technology Systems.
[c] Alternate Assessment based on Alternate Achievement Standards Consortia: DLM – Dynamic Learning Maps; NCSC – National Center and State Collaborative.

The accessibility and accommodations frameworks vary both in terminology and in the student needs they address.

Putting the specific frameworks side-by-side, and including the specific tools for each assessment can help in identifying similarities and differences.

Step 2. Consider the individual needs of students for the tasks in the assessment.

Technology platforms used by the assessment consortia are designed to be customizable. With appropriate programming, they allow educators to make decisions about accessibility and accommodations based on individual student characteristics and needs.

Making blanket decisions for groups of students is not appropriate. Even those accessibility features that are universally available to all students may have to be turned off for some students if these features have proven to be distracting on practice tests or in instruction.

Knowing students well is key to understanding which accessibility features and accommodations should be identified for each student. For example, not all students who speak Spanish will benefit from having a Spanish translation of the assessment. Some students may use Spanish at home, but be less fluent in academic, written Spanish. In such a case, having a Spanish translation on the assessment may be more distracting than helpful. Similarly, providing a highlighting tool may be confusing for some students. Removing the possibility of using a confusing tool will result in more accurate assessment results.

Making decisions will be facilitated by identifying the individual needs of the students in relation to the tasks required by the assessment. Further, it is helpful to obtain student input on their perceptions of the usefulness of various tools.

Input from others may be helpful as well.

Questions to use to guide decision making include the following:

- What are the characteristics of the test the student needs to take? Are the test tasks similar to classroom assessment tasks or does the student need an opportunity to practice similar tasks prior to testing?

- Does the student use an accessibility feature or accommodation for a classroom task that could be used on the state assessment?

- Are there other barriers to the assessment that could be removed by using an accessibility feature or accommodation that is not already used by the student?

- What is the student's perception of how well an accessibility feature or accommodation worked, either during instruction or on past assessments?

- What difficulties, if any, did the student experience when using an accessibility feature or accommodation?

- Is the student willing to learn to use the accessibility feature or accommodation?

- What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, and specialists about how the accessibility features or accommodations worked?

Step 3. Select and document appropriate accessibility features and accommodations for students.

Selecting assessment accessibility features for students who need them is the role of an informed adult or group of adults familiar with the student's needs and preferences. These decisions should also be based on input from other educators, parents or guardians, the student himself or herself (if appropriate), and other adults who work closely with the student. In all cases, decisions should be made in consideration of the

assessment policy, in light of student needs and preferences.

It is important to document all of the tools to be used by an individual student on the assessment. In many cases, this can be done using a PNP, ISAAP, or other state-designated tool.

After considering the student's individual characteristics, educators should identify needs that require accessibility tools and accommodations. When these tools are used, the student will be able to demonstrate what he or she knows and can do.

For students with IEPs or 504 plans, decisions are made by IEP or 504 plan teams. It is important to document all of the tools to be used on the assessment, not just the tools considered to be accommodations. This ensures that the accommodation plan meets the requirements of the Section 504 Rehabilitation Act or the IEP meets the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It also helps with planning for transitions to a post-secondary setting. In some cases, special software programs allow for the information from an online IEP to be easily transferred to a PNP or ISAAP.

Decisions for ELLs should be made by an ELL team of educators who know the student. This team should include a professional with expertise in language acquisition. Accessibility tools to be used should be documented on a language learning plan when possible. This documentation will help ensure the consistent provision of these tools in both instruction and assessment.

Decisions for students who do not have disabilities and who are not ELLs should be made by an educator or team of educators familiar with the student. Students should give input to these decisions when possible. For students without an IEP/504 Plan or ELL Team, it may be more difficult to document the use of accessibility tools for an assessment. In these cases, it will be important to

keep copies of the PNP or ISAAP in the student's file so that a record of these decisions is available when needed.

If several accessibility features or accommodations are employed for one student, educators should be aware of the possible interactions among them. For example, highlighting used with color contrast may produce unexpected color combinations. Thus, testing them out with the student prior to the assessment is of paramount importance.

It is critical to provide just the right number and combination of accessibility features and accommodations—this means not providing too many or too few accessibility features or accommodations.

Step 4. Make sure students have sufficient opportunity to practice using selected tools before the assessment.

Some students may be experiencing tests on a technology platform for the first time. Ample time should be provided for them to practice accessibility features and accommodations they will be using. This practice time is also an opportunity to identify which accessibility features and accommodations are effective for a given student, and which are not.

Making sure that the same or similar features and accommodations are available during instruction is another way for students to practice using them. On some assessments, accessibility features and accommodations may be presented in a different way from the way they are used during instruction. Teachers should make sure students are aware of these differences and have a chance to practice them prior to the test.

Some accessibility features and accommodations used in instruction may not be allowed on a test because they invalidate the results of the test. This

means that the performance no longer reflects what the test is designed to measure. Teachers should be sure to allow ample opportunities for students to perform on classroom tasks and assessments without the use of the accessibility feature or accommodation that is used in instruction but not allowed for testing.

Step 5. Administer the assessment with appropriate accessibility features and accommodations.

On the day of the assessment, test administrators must be careful to ensure that the assessment is administered with fidelity. Students should take the assessment intended for them. This includes receiving the accessibility features and accommodations that have been designated for the student.

Assessment coordinators will need to plan ahead for locally provided tools, such as a scribe or a separate setting. When providing accommodations or other supports that involve a human, it is important to follow the guidelines accompanying the assessment (for example, guidelines for scribes or sign interpreters).

Step 6. Gather feedback from the student on the use of the tools.

After the assessment, gathering feedback from the student on the use of tools can inform changes for future assessments. If the student finds a tool distracting, for example, it may need to be turned off the next time the assessment is administered. If a student did not use a tool or accommodation, gathering more information will help inform decision-making teams and other adults about the use of that tool in the classroom and for future assessments.

For students who have a 504 plan or an IEP, a team meeting may be a logical time to gather additional feedback from the student on the use of accessibility tools.

For ELLs with a language learning plan, using the team meeting time to gather feedback on accessibility tools will be important. For other ELLs, states or districts may want to develop forms to gather this feedback. This is important because accessibility needs of ELLs are likely to change as the student gains proficiency in English.

For students who do not have disabilities and who are not ELLs, states and districts may want to develop forms or tools to gather information from students on the use of accessibility tools. This information should be gathered as close to the testing time as possible.

Some contextual factors that can guide the selection of appropriate accessibility features and accommodations include:

- Accessibility features and accommodations regularly used by the student during instruction and assessments

- Results of assignments and assessments when accessibility features and accommodations are used and not used

- Effective/ineffective combinations of accessibility features and accommodations

- Opportunities to learn how to use the accessibility feature or accommodation

Step 7. Make needed changes, based on student feedback and performance.

Accessibility tools and accommodations are designed to level the playing field, not to give students who use them an advantage. Nonetheless, it is important to look at how students performed, with (and possibly without) the accessibility tools and accommodations in order to make appropriate changes for future assessments based on students' feedback. As needed changes are made, they should be documented in the PNP or ISAAP as well as in a student's language learning plan, 504 plan, or IEP.

Conclusion

Many of today's assessments are more accessible than they have been before. Providing multiple levels of support on assessments means that all students can have access to an individualized testing experience. Assessment coordinators and other decision makers will require professional development so that the needs of all students can be met while at the same time balancing the need for efficient organization in implementing the assessment.

Resources

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers: *Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual*: http://parcconline.org/parcc-accessibility-features-and-accommodations-manual

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: *Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines*: http://www.smarterbalanced.org/parents-students/support-for-under-represented-students/

Dynamic Learning Maps: *Accessibility*: http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/content/accessibility

National Center and State Collaborative: *Spring 2015 Operational Test Administration Manual*: http://www.ncscpartners.org/resources

ELPA21: *Field Test Accessibility and Accommodations Manual:* http://www.elpa21.org/assessment-system/features-benefits

WIDA-ASSETS WIDA: *Consortium Test and Item Design Plan for the Annual Summative and On-Demand Screener:* https://www.wida.us/assessment/ACCESS20.aspx