Developing Common Accommodations Policies: Discussion Points for Consortia

As the Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia develop their assessments, they will need to develop shared accommodations policies to ensure that their tests are used in consistent ways across the participating states. Developing a common set of accommodations policies will require that Consortium members recognize the divergent viewpoints that currently exist in their states on the use and misuse of accommodations.

This Brief presents data on accommodation policies and patterns of use in Consortium states. It identifies points for the Consortia to discuss as they develop common accommodations policies.

Data on Accommodations Use

One indication of variability in perspectives on accommodations is the wide range in percentages of students with disabilities using accommodations on statewide reading assessments. Figure 1 shows these percentages for the Consortia states on their regular Grade 4 reading assessments in 2007-2008.

In the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium, for example, the percentage of students using accommodations ranged from less than 10% to nearly 90% of students with disabilities. In the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) the percentage of students using accommodations ranged from a low of approximately 1% to nearly 90%. Data are not available for the percentages of English language learners (ELLs) or students with Section 504 plans using assessment accommodations. These are important data for Consortia members to collect and consider.

Data on State Accommodations Policies

Variations exist in current state accommodation policies, particularly those accommodations that are most controversial. One of the

About this Brief

This Brief addresses the need for the Consortia to develop shared accommodations policies. It presents information that shows the variability in use of accommodations and policies across the states within each Consortium. The Brief identifies ways to address the different perspectives on accommodations that underlie this variability, and provides several questions for the Consortia to use as discussion points as they develop their common accommodations policies.

This and other Briefs in this series address the opportunities, resources, and challenges that cross-state collaborative assessment efforts face as they include students with disabilities and English language learners. 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 Race-to-the Top Assessment Consortia decision making.

most controversial accommodations for state reading assessments is the oral presentation of test items. This "read aloud" accommodation may be available to students with disabilities, students with Section 504 plans, and English language learners. Figure 2 shows the percentage of states in each Consortium with specific policies on the read aloud accommodation for students with disabilities.

In SBAC, 23% of member states allowed students with disabilities to use the read aloud accommodation on the state reading test with no conditions on its use, scoring, or interpretation. In that same Consortium, 35% of member states allowed students with disabilities to use the read aloud with conditions (e.g., read aloud is permissible on the reading test but with implications for scoring). Thus, while 58% of all states within the SBAC membership allowed the read aloud accommodation for students with disabilities in some way, 39% of states in that same Consortium explicitly prohibited the use of the read aloud accommodation for any student on the state reading assessment. In the PARCC Consortium, 16% of states allowed the read aloud accommodation on the reading assessment with no conditions for use, scoring, or interpretation of scores. Another 56% of states allowed its use with conditions. Still, 20% of PARCC member states expressly prohibited the use of the read aloud on the state reading assessment.

The use of an English language learner's native language to translate test items is another controversial accommodation. The two Consortia are split between states that allowed the translation of math test items for ELLs and states that prohibited them. In PARCC, 43% of states allowed math test items to be translated while 57% of states prohibited it. In SBAC, 57% of states allowed translation of math items while 43% prohibited it.

Variations in accommodations policies may exist across content areas (for example, the read aloud accommodation may be allowed on the math test, but not the reading test). They also may vary across item types within a content area (for example, calculators may not be allowed on calculation items on the math test but allowed on other items). These types of differences and the reasons for them should be discussed as Consortia members decide on common accommodations policies.

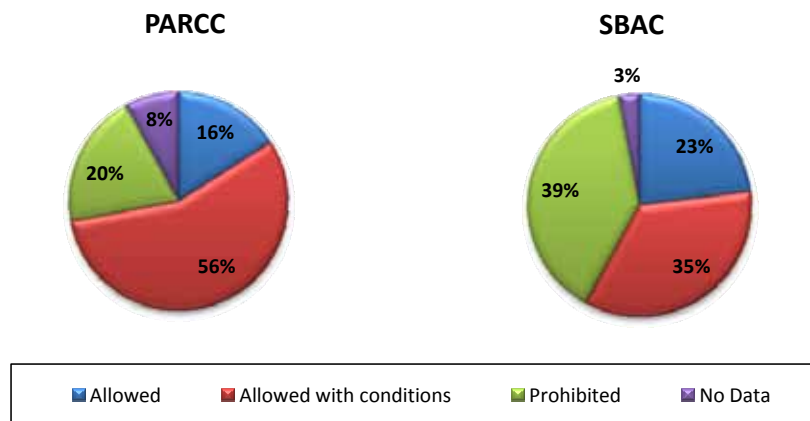## Other Data to Inform Common Accommodations Policy

Consortia should consider how to collect and analyze state accommodations data to inform

Figure 1. Percentage of Grade 4 Students with Disabilities Using Accommodations on the Regular Reading Assessment in Consortia States
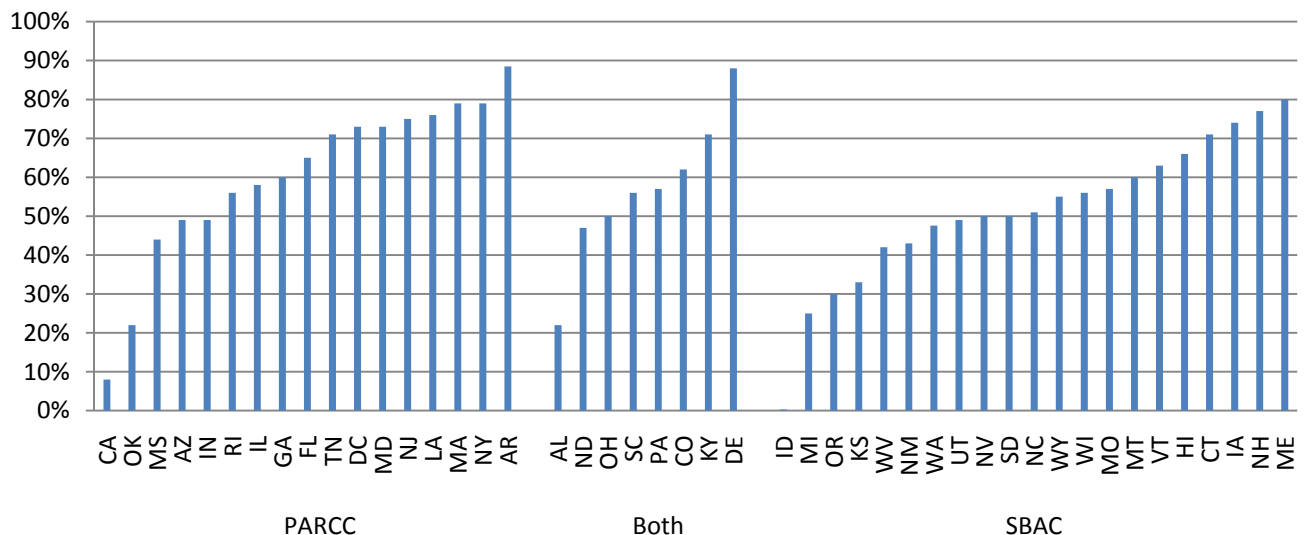
Source: Annual Performance Report: 2007-2008. State Assessment Data Summary. The information on this figure was accurate as of April, 2011.

Figure 2. Consortia States' Read Aloud Policies for Students with Disabilities Taking Reading Assessments

Source: *Data Viewer* (data.nceo.info).

the development of common accommodations policies. According to NCEO's 2007 state survey, 29 states recorded the specific accommodations used by individual students. Examining the specific accommodations used most frequently could provide important information to consider as policies are developed. In addition, it might be useful to explore the accommodations used by English language learners, students in specific disability categories, at different grade levels, in different content areas, or for specific groups of students, such as ELLs with disabilities or special education students who receive free or reduced-price lunch. None of the explorations would negate the fact that accommodations should be based on the targeted content. Still, they will aid in identifying different perspectives and in devising a transition plan for accommodations policies as states move toward the accommodations allowed for the Consortia assessments based on common state standards.

States also should consider examining what, if any, combinations of accommodations are used by students to see whether there are meaningful patterns of use by students in specific disability categories or English proficiency levels. Furthermore these data could help to investigate whether specific accommodations are used too much or too little across states within each consortium. If patterns are found in the use of accommodations, the Consortia members should discuss what might contribute to over-use or

under-use of some accommodations. When examining variation across member states, the opportunity exists to build shared understanding about how an accommodation should be used within the new assessment system, as well as the nature of transition plans that are needed.

Many of the meaningful insights from these analyses will surface during the process of interpreting and discussing what has led to the availability of particular accommodations in member states. Data should be considered in light of the transition from a variety of expectations on accommodations use to a shared expectation for accommodations use and policy among Consortia states.

Discussion Points

Several points should be discussed as the Consortia gather and analyze data to inform accommodations policy decisions. The Consortia have the opportunity now to develop consensus on the ways available data can inform the development of policies. Several discussion questions are offered as springboards for reaching consensus:

1. Why do the accommodations policies differ across states? How did the purpose of each state's test and the content being tested affect the policies?
2. What worked well with current policies? What was problematic?
3. What types of data on the use of specific

accommodations could assist in formulating new accommodations policies?

4. What mechanisms should be developed to collect and share state-level data on the use of accommodations across Consortia states after common accommodation policies have been identified?

5. What principles should guide the development of accommodations policies and practices? How can data inform the development of these principles?

Other questions will emerge in preparation for the successful implementation of a common assessment with common accommodations policies—how to track and monitor accommodations used by students, what forms are needed to document what each student should be offered for accommodations and then for recording what was used are part of this planning. Further, it will be important to develop a framework to ensure that shared decision-making processes are used across Consortia states, both for participation with accommodations and for the specific accommodations recommended for individual students. These considerations are beyond those that can be addressed with aggregate data on accommodations policies and use, but nevertheless will be important as Consortia states move to implement their common accommodations.

Resources

The following resources can be found on the NCEO Web site (nceo.info) under the Reports section:

2009 State Policies on Assessment Participation and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities (Synthesis Report 83) (2011). Christensen, L. L., Scullin, S., Braam, M., & Thurlow, M. L. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Meeting the Needs of Special Education Students: Recommendations for the Race-to-the-Top Consortia and States (2011). Thurlow, M. L., Quenemoen, R. F., & Lazarus, S. S. Washington, DC: Arabella Advisors.

State Reports on the Participation and Performance of English Language Learners with Disabilities in 2006-2007 (Technical Report 54) (2009). Albus, D., Thurlow, M., & Liu, K. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.