

Improving the Accessibility of State-Mandated Assessments: Findings from a Focus Group of State Education Agency Representatives

By National AEM Center at CAST

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Introduction

The [National Center on Accessible Educational Materials for Learning](#) at CAST (AEM Center) is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, to increase the availability and use of accessible educational materials (AEM) and related technologies for learners with disabilities who need them. AEM is defined as “print- and technology-based educational materials, including printed and electronic textbooks and related core materials that are designed or enhanced in a way that makes them usable across the widest range of learner variability, regardless of format (e.g., print, digital, graphic, audio, video)” (Footnote 10, Federal Register / Vol. 79, No. 90 / Friday, May 9, 2014 / Notices, page 26728). The provision of AEM is an obligation of state and local education agencies under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Ensuring participation in state-mandated assessments by students who need AEM and related technologies is an extension of the AEM Center’s technical assistance activities. The needs of students who rely on AEM for daily learning transfer to state-mandated and large-scale assessments. As stated by the Office of Special Education Programs, “Far too often, [students with disabilities] cannot use their accommodations or assistive technology (AT) on State-mandated tests due to issues with interoperability, privacy, and security concerns. These problems persist even when the AT is an approved device or resource” (Federal Register / Vol. 84, No. 148 / Thursday, August 1, 2019 / Notices, page 37634). When test developers follow best practices for creating accessible digital content and technology, consistent with AEM, barriers to assessment for students who use AT can be lowered and the validity of inferences from test results can be improved. At the same time, states need to communicate with both the test developer and districts to ensure the readiness of students who will need AEM and AT to complete the assessment.

Purpose

The purpose of this interim report is to provide state leaders and test developers with initial considerations for improving the accessibility of state-mandated assessments for students with disabilities, specifically those who use AT and AEM in daily instruction. These findings can be used by states to inform the development of policies and guidelines and by test developers to inform the design of assessment systems and platforms. Most desirable is that the findings will help initiate improved collaboration between and among states, districts, and test developers.

Findings

As a data-gathering activity to learn about the current status of the accessibility of state-mandated assessments, the AEM Center conducted two ninety-minute virtual focus group convenings in early 2022. A total of fourteen assessment and special education leaders from nine states participated in the two separate meetings. The participants included a range of State representatives, including five General Education Assessment Coordinators, three Alternative Assessment Coordinators, three Special Education Coordinators, two AEM service providers, and a higher education expert. Information about the collective barriers, challenges, and successes experienced by states in ensuring equitable access to assessment for students with disabilities was collected.

Six general findings were identified by the AEM Center:

1. Accessibility requirements need to be explicit and strategically communicated to test developers.
2. Students need access to the same features and tools used for daily learning.
3. Security measures commonly interfere with accessibility.
4. The coordination between SEAs and LEAs needs to be improved.
5. Differentiated training and technical assistance are needed.
6. States should support each other by adopting a holistic, unified approach.

Finding 1: Accessibility requirements need to be explicit and strategically communicated to test developers.

Evidence: Participants expressed a range of observations and recommendations related to communicating accessibility requirements to test developers:

- There is a need for sample language that SEAs can adapt for their procurement policies, RFPs, contracts, and agreements with test developers. While the National AEM Center provides procurement guidance for digital learning materials and technologies, language specific to assessment is needed.
- Quality assurance of the accessibility of test developers' solutions has been inconsistent. There was agreement among the participants that test developers should be required to thoroughly test their solutions for accessibility. Layers of redundancy for testing the accessibility of content (e.g., braille, digital text elements, alt text), as well as AT built into and/or available from within the assessment delivery platforms, should be included in RFPs and other agreements.

- Long-term contracts (at least 5 years) are preferred, and work best when there is the option to amend them in a timely and cost-effective manner to help ensure the needs of students using AT and AEM are being met.
- Focus group participants reported being asked to pay full price for accessibility solutions that have already been provided by the test developer for another customer. States should only be charged appropriate integration fees for existing solutions.

Finding 2: Students need access to the same features and tools used for daily learning.

Evidence: The accessibility tools and features available to students during assessment must be the same as those they use for daily instruction, to the extent possible. Currently, misalignments exist between the technology built into the assessment for student use (whether as accommodation or universally available) and what students are accustomed to using daily. Often, AT embedded in assessment platforms is similar, but not identical, to the applications used by students (e.g., text-to-speech or screen reader). To ensure equity, students must be provided adequate opportunity to learn and practice with test interfaces prior to the assessment. Some participants indicated that their states have worked directly and successfully with third-party AT vendors to address this problem. SEAs, test developers, and third-party AT vendors should work collaboratively to ensure that students with disabilities are comfortable and adept using testing tools.

Finding 3: Security measures commonly interfere with accessibility.

Evidence: Whether the accessibility features and tools are built into the assessment delivery system or are external solutions intended to be available from within, security measures commonly block students' access to them. Participants also questioned the extent to which perceptions of student cheating are a factor in blocking access to accessibility and accommodations.

Finding 4: The coordination between SEAs and LEAs needs to be improved.

Evidence: Participants reported that a “chain of command” or “gatekeepers” need to be navigated to get information and resources directly to teachers and IEP teams, such as which accommodations are allowable on which portions of state tests. An analogy of a funnel was made in that the communication stream narrows as it passes from the SEA to LEAs, schools, and teachers. Questions related to this phenomenon included “Who are the agents of communication?” and “Where are the points of interaction that

influence the flow of information?” Participants pointed to the need for a robust system of assessment coordination at the local level (district and school building).

Finding 5: Differentiated training and technical assistance are needed.

Evidence: Participants communicated the need to build the capacity of SEAs and LEAs to work both collaboratively and independently. Information needs to be differentiated by target audience, and delivery methods need to be varied. Participants suggested SEAs and LEAs conduct needs assessments of stakeholder groups to inform training and TA plans.

Finding 6: States should support each other by adopting a holistic, unified approach.

Evidence: Except in the case of consortia (e.g., SBAC), states generally negotiate with test developers and third-party vendors independently and in isolation of one another. As a result, each often pays for a different combination of solutions (e.g., availability of text-to-speech, speech-to-text, word prediction). The availability of solutions isn't always clear to those procuring assessments.

A solution that will scale nationally is preferred over state-by-state, district-by-district approaches. For example, states should work together on accommodation requests for test developers to avoid replication and reduce costs. Individual state policies, cultures, and perceptions, however, were cited as persistent barriers, particularly those related to differences in allowable accommodations due to their believed impact on construct validity.

Summary

According to fourteen assessment and special education leaders representing nine states in two separate focus groups conducted by the AEM Center, students who use AT and AEM in daily instruction are provided inconsistent opportunities to participate fully and equally in state-mandated assessments. Findings from the focus groups indicate that improvements should be made in the areas of communicating accessibility requirements; aligning the use of AT and AEM between instruction and assessment; addressing the conflict between test security and students' needs for AT and AEM; coordinating policies and guidelines between states and districts; providing effective training and technical assistance to all stakeholders; and partnering across states to increase consistency and cost efficiencies.