

Study Guide for the AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for K-12

By the National AEM Center at CAST

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Purpose

The National Center on Accessible Educational Materials for Learning (National AEM Center) at CAST is a technical assistance (TA) center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The purpose of the Center is to improve educational and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities through TA activities that increase both the availability and the use of accessible materials and technologies. The Center's stakeholders serve and advocate for individuals with disabilities and their families across the continuum of educational settings: early learning, K–12, and postsecondary academic and career training programs.

The AEM Center's TA is guided by the [Quality Indicators for the Provision of AEM and Accessible Technologies](#). The seven Quality Indicators describe the essential elements of a system that ensures the consistent, reliable, and timely provision of high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all learners who need them, including those with disabilities. While intended to be implemented by a coordinated team of representatives from within a system (i.e., state, district, higher ed institution, or workforce agency), each individual representative needs an operational understanding of the Quality Indicators. It is through a collective understanding of individual roles and responsibilities that systems change occurs. The purpose of this guide is to facilitate both individual and collective understanding of the AEM Quality Indicators.

Use

This guide is for individuals and teams seeking to develop knowledge and practical skills to apply the AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for K-12. The target audience includes state and local administrators; technology personnel across EdTech, IT, and AT; general and special education teachers; library and media specialists; service providers; and families of students with disabilities. As a result of completing the suggested activities in this guide, you should be prepared to use best practices for providing accessible materials and technologies in your setting. This guide is also designed to prepare individuals to be active and meaningful contributors to a team that is working toward systems change at the state and/or local levels.

Begin by downloading the [AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for K-12](#) from the AEM Center website. Carefully review each Quality Indicator and its Critical Components, being certain to follow hyperlinks for additional information. It is recommended that you complete a full review of all seven Quality Indicators before completing the activities presented in this guide.

The time commitment for completing this study of the Quality Indicators is determined by the user. You may choose to methodically complete all activities or make a selection. Some are brief reads, listens, or views for one sitting, while others involve more self-action; the latter is particularly true of the activities for Quality Indicators 5 and 6, which are related to data collection and use. You may consider completing shorter activities under each Quality Indicator first, and then return to complete the more involved activities on a second pass.

This study guide is designed in the format of a workbook with activities and templates. There are two parts: (1) This PDF document that describes activities for each AEM Quality Indicator and (2) An [editable Activity Templates document](#). In addition to the supports provided with the guide, we encourage you and/or your team to consider options for recording what you learn during your study of the Quality Indicators. Google Docs, Word, OneNote, or other program can be used to create separate sections for each Quality Indicator. A workbook created with Excel or Google Sheets is another option. Regardless of the format you choose, challenge yourself to make it accessible from the start by following the AEM Center's guidance on [Creating Accessible Documents](#).

If you need assistance with using this study guide, please contact us by email at aem@cast.org.

Activities for Making Meaning of the AEM Quality Indicators

For each of the seven Quality Indicators, a set of practical actions that an individual or team can take is provided. These are designed to help you build vocabulary, understand concepts, make human connections, collect relevant information, and apply effective practices to your context. For selected activities, templates are provided that are referenced throughout the guide. [Download the Activity Templates](#).

Quality Indicator 1: A Coordinated System

The State has a coordinated system for the provision of high-quality accessible materials and technologies, and school districts use this system for the benefit of all students who need them.

Activity 1.1. Identify and create a list of some of the people, agencies, or organizations in your state and/or school district who have the roles listed in Critical Component 1.1. Reach out to them and ask: Do they have information and resources for improving the

accessibility of educational materials and technologies for students with disabilities? If so, let them know that you'd like to benefit from these resources. If not, explain why accessibility is so important for the independence, participation, and progress of all learners in your state or district. Express your interest in improving the accessibility of materials and technologies provided to students and inform them about the AEM Center's resources. The **Activity 1.1 template** provides a sample organizer and email language ready to be edited.

Activity 1.2. Increase your knowledge of what the term “accessible” means by reviewing the [AEM-related definitions on the AEM Center website](#). Consider the relationship between AEM and assistive technology (AT). The **Activity 1.2 template** provides a sample exercise for applying AEM-related definitions.

Activity 1.3. Review the POUR model as a guide for understanding accessibility principles and guidelines in [Vetting for Accessibility](#) on the AEM Center website. The **Activity 1.3 template** provides a sample exercise for applying the four POUR principles.

Activity 1.4. Familiarize yourself with the process of [Acquiring Accessible Formats](#) on the AEM Center website. The **Activity 1.4 template** provides a sample exercise for checking your understanding.

Quality Indicator 2: Timely Manner

High-quality accessible materials and technologies needed for the full participation of students with disabilities are provided in a timely manner.

Activity 2.1. Read the AEM Center policy brief, [The Right of Students with Disabilities Who Need AEM to Receive These Materials in a Timely Manner](#). Include the article in an email to one or more leaders in your state agency or district, informing them of what you learned from reading it. Suggest that they too read it and take action on providing AEM. The **Activity 2.1 template** provides sample email language ready to be edited.

Activity 2.2. Reach out to your [State AEM Contact](#) and ask about your state's definition of timely manner. The **Activity 2.2 template** provides sample email language ready to be edited.

Activity 2.3. Find out if your district has a [free organizational membership with Bookshare](#), which can minimize delays in providing accessible materials to students who need them. If your district isn't already using Bookshare, inform your special

education director about the service. The **Activity 2.3 template** provides sample email language ready to be edited.

Quality Indicator 3: Written Guidelines

The State develops and implements written guidelines on the provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies and disseminates these guidelines to all stakeholders. School districts ensure the guidelines are implemented locally.

Activity 3.1. Learn about the [National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard \(NIMAS\)](#), a provision of IDEA 2004. After gaining an understanding of NIMAS, learn about the online repository that stores NIMAS files by visiting the website of the [National Instructional Materials Access Center \(NIMAC\)](#). [Contact your NIMAC State Coordinator](#) and ask where your state’s NIMAS-related policies and guidelines are located. The **Activity 3.1 template** provides sample email language ready to be edited.

Activity 3.2. Review the AEM Center’s [sample language for including NIMAS requirements in purchase orders and contracts](#), including important information for math and science materials and digital instructional materials. The **Activity 3.2 template** provides a sample activity for comparing your state or district procurement guidelines to the practices recommended by the AEM Center.

Activity 3.3. Review the AEM Center’s best practices for [communicating digital accessibility requirements](#) in the procurement process. The **Activity 3.3 template** provides a sample activity for comparing your state or district procurement guidelines to the practices recommended by the AEM Center.

Activity 3.4. Read the AEM Center guide, [AEM in the IEP](#). Locate your state or district IEP form and guidance. Is the consideration of AEM/AIM included? The **Activity 3.4 template** provides a sample activity for applying best practices for considering AEM in the IEP.

Activity 3.5. Use the [AEM Navigator](#) to understand the decision-making process for providing accessible formats to students who need them. With a team, identify a student in your school or setting who may need accessible formats but hasn’t yet been identified. Use the AEM Navigator guidance and the accompanying student summary worksheet to go through the decision-making process.

Quality Indicator 4: Comprehensive Learning Opportunities

The State and school districts provide or arrange for comprehensive learning opportunities and technical assistance (TA) that address all areas of the provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 4.1. Make a list of your state’s or district’s current professional development priorities and initiatives. How is accessibility of educational materials and technologies directly relevant to those? Consider embedding accessibility in existing and future professional development to build the capacity of all stakeholders. The **Activity 4.1 template** provides a sample exercise.

Activity 4.2. Offer an introduction to accessibility training with the AEM Center’s video series, [Accessible Learning Across the Lifespan](#). Use the key takeaways and related resources for each video to guide interactive discussions and activities.

Activity 4.3. Register for the monthly [AEM Café](#). Invite a colleague to join you as an “accessibility ally” for continuing discussions and applying new ideas.

Activity 4.4. Subscribe to [The Accessible Learning Experience podcast](#). Invite others to subscribe and hold monthly discussions to share what you learned and how it applies to improving accessibility for your learners.

Activity 4.5. Develop a training series on creating accessible materials by using the guidance under the Create menu of the [AEM Center website](#). Start with the basics of [Creating Accessible Documents](#) and [Creating Accessible Video](#). Math and science teachers will benefit from [Creating Accessible STEM Materials](#). And your school and district communications staff will reach more community stakeholders by [Creating Accessible Social Media Posts](#).

Activity 4.6. Lead an “AEM Article Club.” Here are some publications to get started:

- [Audio-Supported Reading & Students with Learning Disabilities: Giving Voice to All Learners](#)
- [Open Educational Resources: Ensuring Inclusive Learning in Uncertain Times](#)
- [Audio-Supported Reading for Students Who are Blind or Visually Impaired](#)
- [The Potential Benefits of Accessible Digital Learning Materials for Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)
- [Procuring Accessible Digital Materials and Technologies for Teaching and Learning: The What, Why, Who, and How](#)

- [Building on a Firm Foundation: Supporting Students with More Intensive Support Needs in UDL Environments](#)
- [Fair Use and Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [Improving the Accessibility of State-Mandated Assessments: Findings from a Focus Group of SEA Representatives](#)

Quality Indicator 5: Data Collection

The State and school districts use a secure, systematic data collection process to monitor and evaluate the equitable, timely provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 5.1: Conduct an inventory of the existing digital materials and technologies used in your state, district, school, or your own classroom. This can include devices, websites, apps, ebooks, software programs, etc. For each, find and link to any available accessibility information, such as an [accessibility statement from the developer](#) (see [CAST’s exemplar](#)) or a [VPAT®/Accessibility Conformance Report \(ACR\)](#). If no information is available online, submit a request through the company’s “Contact Us” form or other available method. The **Activity 5.1 template** provides a sample format for data collection and suggested language when contacting companies for product accessibility information.

Activity 5.2. Create and maintain a database for tracking both the timeliness and the quality of materials provided to students who need [accessible formats](#). Include the sources of those formats (e.g., Bookshare, Learning Ally, your state’s IMC/IRC, local conversion, etc.). Observe and ask students how easy or difficult it is for them to use the accessible formats they’re provided and include these notes about the material’s quality in the database. The **Activity 5.2 template** provides a sample format for tracking data on the timeliness and quality of accessible formats provided to students.

Activity 5.3. Invite parents and caregivers to provide feedback on the accessibility and usability of materials and technologies provided to their children. Provide a feedback form in the languages used by families in your community. Include questions about accessibility and usability of materials and technologies during parent-student conferences, IEP meetings, and 504 plan meetings. The **Activity 5.3 template** provides a sample feedback form.

Quality Indicator 6: Data Use

The State and school districts have a plan for the secure use of data to guide changes for continuous improvement in all areas of the systemic provision and use of high-quality accessible materials and technologies.

Activity 6.1. Share your data on the accessibility of digital materials and technologies provided to students (Activity 5.1) with decision makers, such as those in positions related to procurement, curriculum, and EdTech or IT. Suggest that the inventory process be expanded to include other digital materials and technologies used across the district. Explain that the results can inform priorities and action steps to improve accessibility outcomes in future procurement processes. The **Activity 6.1 template** provides sample language when sharing the data.

Activity 6.2. Share your data on the timeliness and quality of accessible formats provided to students (Activity 5.2) with special education administration and related staff. Discuss the data and deliberate the possible causes of any delays and any instances of low-quality materials. Identify corrective actions. The **Activity 6.2 template** provides sample language when sharing the data.

Activity 6.3. Convene a team to analyze the parent/caregiver feedback data (Activity 5.3). Use charts and graphs to identify trends. Develop a plan to target any indications of accessibility barriers for students. Set a schedule for administering the survey, such as annually or other timeline appropriate to your school or district.

Quality Indicator 7: Allocation of Resources

Before engaging in the activities below, refer to Quality Indicator 7 in the [AEM Quality Indicators with Critical Components for Providing AEM and Accessible Technologies document](#).

Activity 7.1. Create a list of the investments you believe would contribute to the building of a system for providing timely and high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all learners, whether you're at the state or district level. These can be related to personnel needs, training and continuing education, release time, data management software, technology updates, etc. Share this list with a decision maker in your setting to begin the conversation about needed resources for providing timely and high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all learners. The **Activity 7.1 template** provides a sample organizer.

Activity 7.2. If you're in a state or district leadership role, invite others to join you in a shared reading of an article by CCSSO, [Ensuring an Equitable Opportunity: Providing a High-Quality Education for Students with Disabilities](#). Offer the following essential questions to guide the reading and group discussion:

- How does the alignment between ESSA and IDEA, described by the authors, apply to the provision of accessible materials and technologies?

- How can the systems approach described by the authors inform a coordinated system for providing accessible materials and technologies?
- How might strategies for braiding and blending ESSA and IDEA funds apply to allocating resources related to the provision of accessible materials and technologies?

Ready for Systems Change Work?

When your state agency or district is ready to commit to creating a coordinated and sustainable system for providing timely and high-quality accessible materials and technologies for all learners, start by conducting a baseline self-assessment of the AEM Quality Indicators. The AEM Center offers two tools that guide states and districts through this process, as well as associated goal setting and progress monitoring:

- The [AEM Pilot](#) is a web-based tool that stores data and generates reports. The self-assessment in the AEM Pilot offers basic rating scales for each Quality Indicator.
- The [Innovation Configuration for the AEM Quality Indicators](#) is a digital text document with fields for data entry. The self-assessment in the Innovation Configuration offers a robust and comprehensive rating of implementation stages at the Critical Component level of each Quality Indicator.

Please contact the AEM Center team at aem@cast.org with questions about these tools.