

Q&A Guide

Recommendations for Improving the Provision and Use of Braille for State-Mandated Assessment

Recommendation 1a:

Use and type of accommodations during instruction must be allowable for and available during assessment

Acknowledgments

The AEM Center acknowledges the following experts who served on a workgroup to support our team in the development of this Q&A Guide for Recommendation 1a:

Michael Cantino, BVIS Technology Professional Development Specialist,
Northwest Regional Education Service District, Oregon
Rachel Schultz, AEM Specialist, AT&AEM Center, OCALI

Introduction

This Q&A Guide is a supplement to the AEM Center's practice brief, [Recommendations for Improving the Provision and Use of Braille for State-Mandated Assessment](#). The AEM Center, in collaboration with national experts in the provision of braille and other services for blind students, developed this guide to help users understand and implement Recommendation 1a from the practice brief: Use and type of accommodations during instruction must be allowable for and available during assessment.

Rationale for Recommendation 1a

The premise of Recommendation 1a is that any accommodation used during instruction should also be available for use in the testing environment. Accommodations that are recommended for an individual on an IEP or 504 plan, including assistive technology (AT), are to be made available in both instruction and assessment situations to assure

appropriate access and consistent supports for that individual. When students do not have access to their accommodations or AT, they may experience unintended barriers to completing assessments, and thus unable to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and understanding. If a student is prevented from demonstrating their knowledge or completing tasks with their typical accommodations, assessment results may be invalid. The best case scenario for the provision and use of braille for students who require it for both instruction and assessment includes the following:

- Accommodations are planned in advance, documented for the student, obtained, and used during instruction prior to assessment.
- The accommodation process is well documented and easy to navigate, with clear expectations.
- Accommodations are available for all assessments — informal, formal, districtwide, and statewide standardized assessments.

Questions & Answers

Question 1:

What kinds of accommodations are commonly used by students during assessments?

Typical accommodations include extended time, reader/scribe, reduced distractions, alternate formats, manipulatives, use of AT devices such as:

- Screen reader
- Dictation tool
- Multiple monitors
- Talking calculator
- Text to speech
- Magnification features
- Braille notetaker

Critical success factors for students who require accommodations for assessment include access to space, available time, appropriate staffing (proctor, reader, scribe), access to technology, and accessible formats of test materials.

Question 2:

What kinds of AT are commonly used by students during assessments?

- Typical examples of AT include:
- Text to speech
- Screen reader
- Speech to text (dictation)
- Word prediction
- Magnification software/hardware
- Braille notetaker/display
- Talking calculator
- Word processor
- Switch access
- Captioning and audio description for video
- Transcript for audio

Critical success factors for students who require AT for assessment include AT compatibility with the testing interface, data stored on the device, and test propriety.

Question 3:

How does access to accommodations impact a student's performance on assessments?

Many students require accommodations to access learning materials effectively, and accommodations can vary in complexity. Many students also need accommodations to demonstrate understanding. Education teams work hard to develop accommodations that provide students with access to content and services. Students rely on these accommodations, the use of which is woven into their day-to-day activities and schoolwork. In the same manner that accommodations are available in the instructional setting, they should be made available in any assessment situation as well.

Removing access to these accommodations for testing purposes, or even requiring students to alter their regular accommodations, can have adverse effects on testing outcomes. When students are required to adjust their routines or accommodations to fit within the confines of an assessment, they spend more mental energy on adapting to

the test environment and less energy on the assessment itself. These changes can also engender frustration for students, which can further hamper their test performance. For example, if a student is accustomed to using a specific math dictation tool, it can be very difficult to work with a scribe instead. The scribe may not be familiar with how the student describes the math content, or the scribe may not have a sufficient level of understanding to accurately transcribe the student's work. The student will have to dedicate energy to adapting their regular workflow, as well as checking the scribe's work, taking their attention and energy away from the assessment itself.

AT can be complex, and students spend a significant amount of time and energy learning to fluently utilize their AT. Requiring a student to use a similar yet unfamiliar AT (e.g., requiring the use of a stand-alone magnification tool rather than simple magnification with reflow inside a browser) can be very disruptive and challenging. Even switching between comparable tools (e.g., using the JAWS screen reader vs. using the VoiceOver screen reader) can be far more demanding and complicated than non-AT users might expect.

Critical success factors for providing consistent accommodations include interoperability of AT in assessments, adequate digital accessibility to support AT, and assessments available in accessible formats. Use of unfamiliar AT may be a barrier for students when the focus becomes the tool and how to use it, versus demonstrating understanding of the construct being measured.

Question 4:

How can we ensure that our assessments are compatible with the AT being used by students?

To best support a variety of AT, digital materials should comply with the current version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Optimally, students can use the same devices/software in the assessment situation as they do in the instructional environment. Additionally, it is a good idea for students to go into the assessment environment, prior to the actual assessment time, to practice the use of different devices and AT features to check for compatibility with the assessment platform. This will help reduce the risk of encountering barriers or bugs within the testing system during assessment.

Critical success factors for students to effectively use AT in both instruction and assessment include access to practice tests (including in accessible formats), user

testing to confirm digital accessibility, and end-user feedback on potential issues, such as impact of security features on interoperability with AT. Be aware of assessment security rules and be sure the accommodations needed are available and accessible for each student.

Question 5:

Can some accommodations invalidate a test item? For example, can an image description provide the student with the answer?

This is rare. When it does occur, test-item writers should carefully consider how their test item has been constructed and whether the item should be revised to better support students who use accommodations.

In the case of image description, it is rare for a carefully constructed image description to “give away” an answer. An exception would be a test item that relies on visual analysis (e.g., an optical illusion). It is important for those writing image descriptions to have a clear understanding of a question's intent so they can avoid inadvertently naming information that students are meant to infer from an image.

The first step in determining accommodations or alterations of a test item is to identify what is being assessed: What is the construct? Identifying the purpose of a test item helps to determine whether a particular student accommodation or alteration of the test item is appropriate.