National Center on Accessible Educational Materials

Q&A Guide

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

Recommendation 2c:
Coordination and consistency among State Education Agencies (SEAs)

Acknowledgments

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 2c from the practice brief: Coordination and consistency among State Education Agencies (SEAs).

Rationale for Recommendation 2c

Successfully implementing state-mandated assessment in K-12 education is a complex endeavor that, among other essential elements, must factor in the different accommodations required to ensure equitable access for all students. SEAs play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of these assessments, from standards and policies

to best practices and procurement protocols. One critical area that needs attention is the provision of assessment material in high-quality braille for blind students.

Because of the effort, costs, and challenges - not to mention the impact on student outcomes - it is vital that SEAs engage in ongoing collaborative efforts to ensure the timely provision of both paper and digital braille assessments. For example, better coordination among SEAs could:

- Improve the quality and accessibility of braille assessments overall;
- Promote effective strategies that impact budget and implementation; and
- Increase best practice awareness for key staff and boost professional development.

To reach those outcomes, there are three action areas that SEAs should consider for collaboration:

- Develop and share standards, policies, common definitions/frameworks, best practices, and procurement and quality protocols to ensure the timely provision of assessment material in high-quality braille format (paper and digital) for students who require them.
- Re-evaluate processes for all types of assessments, with an initial focus on high stakes tests. This should include providing adequate training and support for assessment administrators and staff and using technology and other tools to streamline the accommodation processes.
- Expand reach and more frequently contact local districts and schools to ensure that assessment accommodations are appropriate and effective, and that students who require braille receive the necessary support and accommodations during testing.

Questions & Answers

Question 1:

What activities carried out by SEAs significantly influence the provision of assessment material in timely, high-quality braille?

- Setting clear guidelines for expectations, processes, and vendor requirements and agreements;
- Establishing adequate timelines for implementation of assessment in braille;

- Leveraging best practices/examples of successful implementation of braille for assessment from across districts;
- Providing funding, training, and resources as needed;
- Engaging critical partners at all levels to ensure that assessment materials are provided and implemented in consistent, high-quality braille for students who require them.

Question 2:

How can coordination among SEAs improve the timely provision of assessment materials in braille?

SEAs can coordinate to develop and share best practices:

- Ensure the accuracy and accessibility of braille materials for state assessments, include the use of high-quality braille production techniques, materials, and equipment; providing adequate time and resources for proofreading and editing; and involving expert braille transcribers and proofreaders, as well as accessibility specialists, in the process.
- Collaborate on professional development and review processes, including ongoing training and support for teachers and administrators. Adequate professional development opportunities include workshops, webinars, and online resources, as well as involving expert educators and professionals in the training process.
- Share effective strategies for providing braille materials in multiple languages, providing adequate time and resources for translation and proofreading, and involving expert translators and proofreaders in the process.
- Foster interstate collaboration with test vendors to improve the availability and quality of braille by analyzing item interaction types, image description standards and best practices, color contrast requirements, guidance for braille transcribers, guidance for item writers, and up-to-date revisions of the test vendor's style guides.
- Develop common standards and protocols for braille production and assessment administration.

SEAs can coordinate to enhance assessments while reducing costs:

- Coordinate requests to test providers on common enhancements needed for braille users to reduce costs and make useful tools more widely available.

Sharing requests and solutions could also increase the pool of funds available for enhancements, freeing SEAs to more aggressively pursue specific enhancements desired at the state level.

- Research the feasibility of an authorized item bank of test questions optimized for braille. Currently, schools are facing the potential of having too few items in the braille pool to provide a computer-adaptive testing experience for blind students that is comparable to the experience offered to sighted students. Sharing valid items among states, as well as aligning item writing and vetting procedures, could expand the braille pool and provide a more equitable experience to braille users.

SEAs can coordinate to share data and research:

- Share data and analysis results to identify trends and challenges that may be unique to certain regions/student populations and collaborate on strategies to address them. Shared data should include findings on implementation of braille and evaluation efforts.
- Share research and evaluation studies to identify best practices and effective strategies for addressing common challenges, including student performance and outcomes. Establish a common language and framework for addressing shared issues.

Question 3:

What benefits could SEAs gain from standardizing procurement and quality assurance (QA) procedures with test developers and providers?

- A shared set of common requirements across SEAs would help lower/consolidate costs and provide more funding for any state-specific needs. A lack of uniform requirements results in duplication of costs for features and content.
- Consistent language would clarify and standardize what is required and help ensure that test providers build and apply proper QA procedures to those requirements.
- Referencing established, valid solutions and processes would enforce consistent expectations on what the provider should support as a standard service as opposed to varied state/district requirements.

- Leveraging functionality of what is already available would potentially lower fees with test providers. This would potentially reduce costs for providers as well.

Question 4:

Is there an example of a successful collaboration among SEAs to provide timely, high-quality braille for assessment materials?

A working group of members from five states, including Oregon, Montana, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming, undertook a joint project with Cambium to improve the accessibility of the science assessments used on respective state exams. This involved a detailed look at item interaction types, image description standards and best practices, color contrast requirements, guidance for braille transcribers, guidance for item writers, and a revision of the test vendor's style guides. As a result of the multi-state collaboration, Cambium worked with experts to create updated guidance on all the items previously listed. Cambium also created a guidance document detailing the issues raised by the working group and notes on specific steps Cambium will take to resolve the issues in their work and in the work of related vendors, such as braille production houses. In addition to the areas listed above, some notable outcomes included a fixed-form braille assessment (where not precluded by law), offering "pre-embossed" materials to reduce embossing time during testing, and providing both Nemeth and UEB Technical braille transcriptions for all science items shared across the five states.

Question 5:

Is there an example of an SEA that publicly shares information about practices for providing braille for assessment material?

Many SEAs have information posted about current assessment policies and processes. As an example, the Ohio Department of Education includes information on all state tests, as well as additional resources like the accessibility manuals for Ohio State Tests and the English Language Proficiency Assessment.

Question 6:

What are the options for SEAs to start collaborating and maximizing the benefits?

- Start working with groups, such as:
  - [Council of Chief State School Officers](#)
  - [Council of Schools and Services of the Blind](#)
  - [International Association of Accessibility Professionals](#)
  - [National Governors Association](#)
- Create interstate compacts, such as the [Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children](#).
- Participate in federal grant programs or initiatives that support collaboration and coordination among states.
- Build interagency partnerships between and among agencies at the state, federal, and local levels.
- Participate in regional and national networks and associations, such as the [National Braille Association](#), [American Printing House for the Blind](#), [National Federation of the Blind](#), and [American Council of the Blind](#).
- Convene regional or national meetings or conferences to bring together educators, policymakers, and other critical partners from multiple states to discuss common challenges and share best practices. Facilitate opportunities for networking and collaboration.

Question 7:

Where can I find additional resources?

See the [Association of Test Publishers Guidelines for Technology Based Assessments](#).