



# Forum on Common Language for States and Assessment Vendors



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## **Forum on Common Language for States and Assessment Vendors**

### **Background**

More than 80 individuals representing staff from state departments of education, school districts, other countries, testing and testing-related companies, and other educational organizations participated in a forum on June 20, 2016 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to discuss the need for common accessibility language across assessment platforms. The implications for general education students,<sup>1</sup> students who are English learners (ELs), and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans were discussed in breakout sessions. The forum was a pre-session to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) National Conference on Student Assessment (NCSA), and was a collaboration of the Assessing Special Education Students (ASES) State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS), the English Language Learner (ELL) SCASS, and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the forum on common language for states and assessment vendors was to discuss the need for greater collaboration across technology platforms. Although new technology platforms offer a greater array of accessibility supports (accessibility features and accommodations), the variation in the language used to describe these supports and approaches to employing them makes it confusing for educators, students, and other stakeholders.

The specific focus of the forum was for participants to see demonstrations of several vendor accessibility supports and then discuss the challenges related to the differences in language used as they pertain to the three groups:

1. General education students
2. ELs
3. Students with IEPs or 504 plans

Each of these groups addressed several questions, including:

1. How would common accessibility language affect your work and the work of people you collaborate with?
2. What are the challenges of implementing common accessibility language?

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<sup>1</sup> Students who are in general education classrooms and are not identified as a student with a disability or an English learner (EL) are referred to in this report as “general education students.” It is recognized that students with IEPs and 504 plans, as well as ELs, are also general education students, but for purposes of brevity here, we use the term “general education students” to refer to those students who do not have disabilities and are not ELs.

### 3. What strategies could we use to address these challenges?

Although participants had limited time for discussion, the discussions were rich and engaging. The agenda for the three-hour forum was as follows:

- Welcome (Sandra Warren, CCSSO ASES SCASS)
- *White Paper* on common accessibility language (Martha Thurlow, NCEO)
- Presentations from vendors:
  - Trent Workman, Pearson
  - Jake Goldsmith, Measured Progress
  - Jon Cohen, American Institutes for Research
- Discussion sessions
  - Students with IEPs and 504 plans (facilitated by Sheryl Lazarus, NCEO)
  - English learners (facilitated by Laurene Christensen, NCEO)
  - General education students (facilitated by Anne Chartrand, Consultant)
- Debrief and next steps

### **Structure of This Report**

Although this report summarizes the introductory information provided to forum participants, its main purpose is to describe the panel presentations and the facilitated forum discussions. Summaries of the panel presentations were developed from notes taken during the presentations, and from the presenters' slides. Summaries of the facilitated discussions were developed from notes taken by notetakers.

Participants were encouraged to comment and discuss freely, with assurances that no individual's name, nor any state, company, or organization would be attached to comments that were made. Complete anonymity of statements was ensured. This led to frank and open conversations.

### **Session Introduction**

Sandra Warren, CCSSO ASES SCASS Advisor, provided an overview of the forum and highlighted the goals of the session. She assured participants of the desire for open and candid conversations, and noted that a report would be produced as a result of the discussions.

### **Setting the Context for Topic Discussions**

Martha Thurlow, Director of NCEO, opened her remarks by providing an overview of the *White Paper on Common Accessibility Language for States and Assessment Vendors* (Shyyan, Thurlow, Larson, Christensen, & Lazarus, 2016). Thurlow discussed the

paradigm shift that has involved the move from paper-and-pencil assessment to assessments on technology-based platforms. Along with this shift, there has been a focus on accessibility for all students, using a broader approach than the previous focus on only accommodations.

Thurlow mentioned that there are a number of stakeholders with an interest in common language for accessibility. These stakeholders include students, educators, parents, and policymakers.

Tiers of accessibility vary in what they are called in the various assessment consortia. In the *White Paper*, names for the tiers of supports are suggested to be universal features, designated features, and accommodations based on an analysis of terminology used in various consortia.

The implications for common language were discussed, including the need for collaboration among vendors. Common language for accessibility also has implications for formative assessment, professional development, and research.

Following Thurlow's context setting, three individuals representing test vendors shared their approaches to accessibility and to providing access tools and accommodations on their platforms.

### **Three Vendor Demonstrations**

#### **Trent Workman, Pearson**

Trent Workman demonstrated accessibility supports on the Pearson testing platform that is used for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

For PARCC, there are three levels of accessibility features:

1. Accessibility features available to all students
2. Accessibility features identified in advance
3. Accommodations (available for students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities).

The personal needs profile (PNP) is used to identify accessibility features for students. This process is the same for students taking the technology-based test and the paper-based test.

Workman gave a demonstration of the Pearson testing platform. He demonstrated highlighting and the line reader. He mentioned that the line reader was heavily tested in schools in order to improve the accessibility feature. He also showed the answer choice eliminator.

Workman demonstrated color contrast, a feature that is identified in advance. Answer masking allows the answer choices to be hidden until the student clicks on them. Another feature, the magnifier, allows for only a portion of the screen to be made bigger. Zoom is a feature that enlarges the entire screen.

Workman indicated that all the all accessibility supports he demonstrated are accessible using keyboard navigation. Workman demonstrated text-to-speech, a feature allowed for all students on the math assessment. This is a feature that must be identified in advance. The student is able to control the speed of the voice; for the PARCC assessment, the voice is only female. Educators are able to choose text only, or text and graphics to be read.

ASL videos also were demonstrated by Workman. The ASL videos can be positioned by the student. The student can start and stop the video.

Transadaptive Spanish is provided. This includes not only the test content, but also the navigation of the assessment. Text-to-speech is included in Spanish.

Workman concluded his demonstration by mentioning that Pearson has several resources on accessibility online. Pearson is working on building a team of accessibility experts.

### **Jake Goldsmith, Measured Progress**

Jake Goldsmith demonstrated accessibility supports on the Measured Progress platform. In his demonstration, Goldsmith did not focus on one specific assessment but instead focused on the overall supports provided by Measured Progress.

Goldsmith shared the various components related to assessment authoring (e.g., creating item banks, etc.), the testing platform, and reporting. Measured Progress uses a variety of systems for each of these components. Goldsmith stressed the need for standardization in each of these areas.

Goldsmith referred to the interoperability standards as an option Measured Progress uses to standardize its technology platform development. Goldsmith discussed the Accessible Portable Item Protocol (APIP) and its importance in including accessibility features and accommodations in the development of items that can be transferred from one testing platform to another. APIP allows for accessibility to be customized for each student and to be adjusted based on inclusion order. Goldsmith showed an example of a personal needs profile (PNP) and how that connects, through APIP, to provide accessibility features and accommodations.

Goldsmith shared examples of how read aloud and color contrast can be labeled in different test platforms. Color contrast was originally a universal feature, but it became a restricted feature because it was distracting to some students. Goldsmith also discussed masking, zoom, and highlighting.

Goldsmith noted that there are configuration challenges associated with all of the differences in testing platforms due to lack of standardization (e.g., differences in dashboard configuration, navigation processes, etc.). He also noted that the lack of common language causes challenges in tracking accessibility use over time. In addition, these language challenges are confusing to students and educators. Goldsmith concluded his presentation by reiterating the importance of common language.

### **Jon Cohen, American Institutes for Research**

Jon Cohen began his presentation by raising the point that there is a wide range of accessibility supports available to students. He then provided a demonstration of some of the supports available on AIR's testing platform.

Cohen gave a demonstration of text-to-speech. He noted that there are multiple options for how text-to-speech can be provided for students, based on need. He also demonstrated the dictionary feature, and the notepad. He showed the login process for accessing the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) test. He pointed out that "permissive mode" allows for a student's own assistive technology to interact with the assessment platform.

Cohen mentioned that accessibility features and accommodations are intended to help students who need them but not change the construct being measured. He mentioned that logistics sometimes make it challenging to provide accessibility for everyone. For example, with text-to-speech it is important to have headphones. Some accessibility features may be distracting to students, so these features should be limited to only the students who need them. Cohen also mentioned that some accessibility features and accommodations are controversial and that there is not agreement in the field about whether or not they violate the construct being measured. Cohen concluded by suggesting that the prior language of accommodations should be maintained and that accessibility features should be as unrestricted as possible.

### **Summary of Small Group Discussions**

After the vendors demonstrated their accessibility features and accommodations, meeting participants divided into three discussion groups: one group discussed issues for general education students; one group shared perspectives on the implications of common accessibility language for ELs; and a third group focused its discussion on students with disabilities. Each group targeted the conversation to address three questions:

- 1. How would common accessibility language affect your work and the work of people you collaborate with?**
- 2. What are the challenges of implementing common accessibility language?**
- 3. What strategies could we use to address these challenges?**

Each group discussion is summarized here following the question format that was used for the discussion.

## *Students in General Education*

### **How would common accessibility language affect your work and the work of people you collaborate with?**

The group had an active discussion on the topic of accessibility for general education students, acknowledging that this group often is overlooked when considering making decisions for students who need accessibility features and accommodations on assessments. Participants identified several ways in which having common accessibility language would impact their work and the work of their colleagues. Specific comments included:

- It is vital to have common accessibility language across all student groups, including the general education group. General education students are too often forgotten in discussions about accessibility.
- The common language and vocabulary should go across instruction and all assessments, including both local and state assessments. If the language is not used as part of classroom instruction there will continue to be problems when decisions are made about accessibility features.
- Common accessibility language should go across states since students move from one state to another, and access to accessibility features can be denied because teachers, parents, and students do not understand the terminology used in other states.
- Additional professional development is needed to familiarize general education teachers with the accessibility processes, language, and terms. The need for professional development will be even greater as there is a shift to common terminology that is new to educators. Professional development is needed that will help general education teachers to stop thinking about a homogenous group with outliers, and instead start thinking about students along a continuum of accessibility needs.

### **What are the challenges of implementing common accessibility language?**

The group identified several challenges in implementing common accessibility language:

- Vocabulary at the state level is a challenge because states will have to give up “ownership” of their own terminology.
- Language is different at so many levels – national, state, district, and school; there is a need to be sensitive to the challenges at each level.
- Request for proposal (RFP) language is a challenge. It can also be a possible solution since RFP requirements can move vendors toward the use of common language.
- A top-down approach does not always work but may be necessary for this to happen.
- Changing terminology is a monetary expense for everyone.
- The lack of common terminology is not the only challenge. Differences in the placement of the buttons and other navigation tools across systems can also be a challenge that affects the functioning of accessibility features and accommodations.

### **What strategies could we use to address these challenges?**

The group agreed that vendors and consortia could lead the way in making a shift to more common accessibility language. Specific strategies that were identified included:

- The first step is getting the assessment consortia to agree. The consortia can then talk with vendors and states.
- Neutral spaces need to be created where vendors could get together to discuss terminology. Perhaps an organization like IMS Global could assist with this because it maintains the APIP standards. It could bring vendors together to discuss them.
- Federal guidance may be necessary for standardization.
- The NCSA conference sponsors may be able to assist in bringing stakeholders together to develop common language.
- Stakeholders (e.g., states, test vendors, school administrators, classroom teachers, parents, students, accessibility experts) need to be involved in the development of common terminology.

### ***Students Who Are English Learners (ELs)***

#### **How would common accessibility language affect your work and the work of people you collaborate with?**

The group agreed that establishing common accessibility language would facilitate designing and selecting accessibility features and accommodations for ELs and would also shed light on the difficulties of providing supports for ELs with disabilities. Specific comments included:

- There is a need for common language, but there is an important distinction between the accessibility features and accommodations offered to ELs on content exams and English language proficiency (ELP) exams. Common language should be used when appropriate, but important or nuanced differences should not be lost in the process of developing common language.
- Accessibility features and accommodations for ELs with disabilities are hard to classify. Are ELs using them because of their disability or because of their EL status?
- Communication between states and vendors is very important as common language is developed. Assessment developers have sometimes changed terminology on their own, forcing states to create documents that bridged the terminology in the state-produced assessment manual and the vendor-produced assessment platform.
- Common language would reduce the amount of needed professional development on accessibility and accommodations. State department of education staff often spend too much time helping teachers understand what the accessibility features and accommodations are instead of how they can benefit students. Changing this is especially important for teachers working with ELs because they generally

know little about which accessibility features and accommodations would help this group of students.

### **What are the challenges of implementing common accessibility language?**

Throughout the discussion, participants pointed to a number of stakeholder groups that have contributed to the confusion surrounding accessibility language. They also highlighted other challenges in establishing a common accessibility language: ELs' distinct accessibility needs on content tests and ELP tests; ELs' lack of practice with supports before test day; educators' last-minute decisions about which supports ELs should use; and the fact that some supports designed specifically for ELs harm those with the lowest levels of English proficiency. For example, when bilingual dictionaries are provided to students with low English proficiency, the student may spend too much time looking up words in isolation, leading to increased test time and possible frustration on the part of the student. Specific challenges that were identified included:

- Accessibility features and accommodations have names that go bottom-up (i.e., from classrooms) as well as names that go top-down (i.e., from the developers of assessment technology).
- States are invested in the terms that they have always used; similarly, consortia and vendors have preferred terms. It can be a challenge for them to work together to standardize accessibility language.
- Teachers and students are not familiar with some accessibility features and accommodations because they cannot be used in the classroom, and the lack of common terminology just compounds this issue.
- It will be challenging to develop common terminology across content assessments and ELP tests because ELP tests can be more complicated than content tests since they have to capture listening and speaking abilities.
- Accessibility features and accommodations differ across paper-and-pencil and computer-based tests, and it will be challenging to develop common language that works across both.

### **What strategies could we use to address these challenges?**

The group stressed the importance of communication between district and state levels of education as well as the shared responsibility of states and vendors to start putting together a common accessibility language. Several strategies were identified:

- If assessment vendors could agree on accessibility language, that would be a good first step even though states have set accessibility language up until now.
- Programmers who work for assessment vendors need training about accessibility language. They have sometimes changed the names of accessibility features and accommodations without consulting other stakeholders.
- It is important for states to stipulate that bids from assessment vendors need to use common accessibility language.
- There is a need for professional development on accessibility terms and language. Often different accessibility language is used at the district level from what is used at the state level. There should be more communication across levels.

- More research is needed because this might possibly allow states and vendors to reclassify some universal features as designated features.
- It would be productive to have a more extensive roundtable that provides assessment vendors with adequate time to do a detailed side-by-side comparison of the accessibility features and accommodations that they offer.
- A common accessibility language should not only be implemented for state assessments but for local assessments as well. Vendors at all levels of assessment need to be a part of the conversation.
- Both states that are members of State Collaboratives on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS) and states that are not need to be involved in the development of common language. Establishing a common accessibility language should not be limited to SCASS members. All states' assessment departments, working in tandem with ESL and special education departments, should be part of the process.

### *Students Who Have IEPs or 504 Plans*

#### **How would common accessibility language affect your work and the work of the people you collaborate with?**

Participants identified several ways in which having common accessibility language would impact their work and the work of their colleagues. Most of the comments reflected benefits that would be realized. Specific comments included:

- Common language would make it easier to talk to those who have a little bit of knowledge but are confused by different words that mean the same thing.
- Common language would help administrators who have to log in and get students their needed features.
- With common language, students are more likely to receive the accessibility features and accommodations that they need.
- With common language, a student should be able to have the same accessibility features for many purposes – local tests, state tests, instruction, and so on.
- Consistent language would help with the interpretation of research findings because readers would be clearer about the focus of the research.
- Consistent language would help with the administration of national assessments, such as National Association of Educational Procurement (NAEP), because there would no longer be so many different meanings and interpretations in the states.

#### **What are the challenges of implementing common accessibility language?**

Participants noted many challenges, most of them associated with the variability in current language. Several comments focused on the challenges of implementing common language. Specific comments included:

- Getting vendor buy-in may be a challenge. Vendors would have to be willing to change how they structure tests, or what they call accessibility supports. Many

- vendors may not want to change. It may be challenging to get each state to buy into the implementation of common accessibility language.
- Because each state has its own rules and regulations and often works with multiple vendors, the challenges are multiplied. This is especially the case because the state does not have the final say in everything.
  - More will be involved than just changing the language. The specific guidelines for how each feature or accommodation works will need to be agreed upon. The features themselves have to be standardized.
  - Teams have difficulty wrapping their heads around the newest tools, and the new terminology is likely to create the same challenges.
  - Even if we come up with common language for state tests, there are many other tests, such as local tests, that also would benefit from the use of common language.
  - Figuring out the best way to present the common language and to provide training will be important.
  - Certification and licensure tests will still be faced with a challenge because some of the new common language may cause problems for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirement to show a history of accommodations.

### **What strategies could be used to address the challenges in implementing common accessibility language?**

Several suggestions were made for ways to address the challenges that might arise in implementing common accessibility language. Some these were:

- It would be helpful to put together an IEP/504 manual with numbered features. Then, special education departments and assessment departments (and vendors) can all use the same numbers.
- There is a need to clarify who should weigh in on, and sign off on, the common language, so that other efforts (e.g., EdFacts, NAEP) can be aligned with the approach that states take.
- One place to start by creating a matrix and look for the commonalities.
- Another suggestion is to look at the specific terms that are the most problematic, and start with them.
- It is important to involve vendors in discussions about the common language.
- There is a need to consider how to develop processes and procedures (e.g., through a meeting at a conference, such as the National Conference on Student Assessment) that would enable states and vendors to work together to develop common language.

### **Conclusion**

The meeting closed with remarks by Dr. Sheryl Lazarus, Senior Research Associate at NCEO. Lazarus thanked participants for their thoughtful discussion about the possible challenges and benefits of establishing a common accessibility language for assessments. She also noted that NCEO staff would create a report on the proceedings of the session,

which could help to encourage stakeholders to develop a common accessibility language for the good of students, educators, and schools.

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