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FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT

Common-Core Tests to Have Built-in Accommodations

By Nirvi Shah

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When Michael Hock was a special education teacher, he spent hours slicing quarter-inch slits in the center of index cards so that his students could use them to isolate individual words and sentences while taking standardized tests.

When a new generation of tests—the common-core assessments—is unveiled in a few years, special education teachers should be able to put away their index cards and all the other shortcuts and homemade solutions they have created over the years to make paper-and-pencil tests accessible for many students with disabilities.

That's because the new, computerized tests will have accommodations for most students with disabilities built right in.

Using $360 million in federal Race to the Top money, two state collaboratives are designing tests for the new common standards in mathematics and English/language arts that have been adopted by 44 states and the District of Columbia. The federal government expects the tests to be ready by the 2014-15 school year.

The two groups tasked with developing the common-core assessments have been thinking about students with disabilities from the time they first won the grants from the U.S. Department of Education to design the tests. That's a sharp departure from what's been the norm in standardized testing, which has been to consider accommodations for students with disabilities as an afterthought.

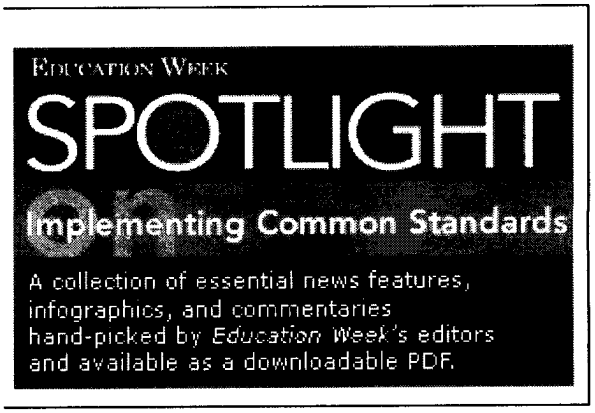
"We're not even thinking about accommodations anymore" in the traditional sense, said Mr. Hock. He is now the director of educational assessment for the Vermont Department of Education and co-chair of the accessibility and accommodations work group for the **SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium**—one of the two groups developing the new tests.

The other test consortium, the **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers**, or PARCC, will soon launch an accessibility-and-fairness technical working group, said Laura M. Slover, the senior vice president of Achieve and the project manager for the Washington-based nonprofit organization's work with the consortium.

Back-End Band-Aids

For years, most states have tried retrofitting exams designed to test students' knowledge in math, reading, science, and writing for students with special needs. But those back-end Band-Aids can create their own set of issues, not the least of which is coordinating testing so that students who need similar adaptations are grouped together and tested at the same time.

"It was a logistical nightmare," said Carol André, the special education director at Exeter High School in Exeter, N.H. "And you still had the same issue with testing: You don't even know if the results you're getting are accurate."



When making current state tests work for all students, there is inconsistency from school to school, she said. In particular, when teachers or proctors are allowed to read portions of a test aloud for students, the way that information is read can vary widely.

"We had to all but police our own people to be sure they were not giving the kids an unfair advantage or leg up. It was really hard, especially for our younger kids. The adults desperately want them to do well," Ms. André said. "Suddenly, without even being conscious of it, you may have an adult who's reading the question and the four answers but they're doing a little more emphasis on choice C, or the kid is reading the adult's expression."

On the new generation of computerized tests, it's likely that words that can be read aloud will be read in the same way, in the same voice, from state to state, Mr. Hock said.

"We're not trying to provide anyone with any kind of advantage," he added. "That's what we're trying to avoid."

Glimpse Ahead

At Vergennes Union High School and Middle School in Vergennes, Vt., special education teacher Suzanne Buck remembers one paper test that was created for a student with vision problems.

"The test was huge. It stuck out so badly. Everyone else could read it from four rows behind," Ms. Buck said.

Now, to test students in science, her school is using an exam designed in much the way the future common-core assessments could be. The **current version** of the science test for students in the New England Common Assessment Program, a collaboration of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, is computerized. Some of the test features for students with disabilities were designed by the Nimble Innovation Lab at Measured Progress, a test-development company in Newton, Mass.

For students with special needs, portions of the test can be magnified right on the screen. Such features also can be turned on and off, so only students for whom they are allowed may access them.

The science test also offers individual students the ability to highlight or obscure words on the screen and play background music or sounds to keep the students calm or focused, a feature intended for students with attention disorders.

Mr. Hock also envisions other features, such as the option of changing the color of the text or allowing students to change the contrast of what they are reading. These features could help students with visual impairments and some types of reading-based learning disabilities, he said.

"The idea of making tests accessible, it's a social-justice issue," Mr. Hock said. "And we want to accurately measure every kid's skills."

Like the current tests, the adaptive features that students would be able to use on the new computerized tests would have to be specified in their individualized education programs, and before test day, they would get a chance to practice using those features.

For some students, the future tests may be translated into different languages. The SMARTER Balanced group has a federal grant of about $10 million in addition to its basic test-development grant to translate its math test into American Sign Language, Spanish, and three other languages.

"The kids who use American Sign Language present unique challenges," Mr. Hock said. "It's not signed English. It's a language all its own."

Interpreter Avatars

But having an interpreter translate a test isn't always possible, or practical, for every student who needs one. One idea the Nimble Innovation Lab has experimented with is a sign-language avatar that would appear on screen when a deaf student opts to use it, said Jennifer Higgins, the research manager at the lab.

And, as with readers, all signers aren't usually signing exactly alike, she said. But a computer-generated avatar would sign the same way for everyone.

"The consistency and reliability would be improved over what we have now," Ms. Higgins said. Also, an **avatar that moves its lips and signs at the same time** would cost less than trying to find real people to sign for students in person or recording videos of a real person signing an entire test.

"The way it is now, you have who-knows-how-many people delivering these tests in all these states. This would be significantly cheaper than that," Ms. Higgins said.

While the computerized tests could address many of the challenges paper-and-pencil tests now pose for students with disabilities, administering the tests could remain a challenge. (**"Common Assessments Are a Test for Schools' Technology,"** April 27, 2011.)

At Ms. Buck's 600-student school in Vermont, while computerized versions of the science test were available for 11th and 8th graders, the school chose to use them only with 11th graders because the testing window was the same for both groups, and the school doesn't have enough computers to give everyone the test at once.

And the tests still won't meet the needs of all students with special needs. The assessment consortia are charged with creating exams for 99 percent of students. For the remaining 1 percent of students with significant cognitive disabilities, separate exams are being designed.

Regardless of the challenges, the new generation of tests will offer a huge advantage, Ms. Buck said, compared to that large-type print test: The accommodating features are discreet. "It's built in. They all took the assessment online," she said. "No one knew the person next to them was having it read to them."

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