Forum on Accommodations in the 21st Century: Critical Considerations for Students with Disabilities

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Assessing Special Education Students ASES
State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards

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Critical Considerations for Students with Disabilities

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Forum on Accommodations in the 21st Century:

Critical Considerations for Students with Disabilities

Background

Sixty individuals representing 21 states, 9 testing companies, and 14 other organizations participated in a forum on June 19, 2011 in Orlando, Florida, to discuss accommodations in the future. The forum was a pre-session to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) National Conference on Student Assessment, and was a collaboration of the Assessing Special Education Students (ASES) State Collaborative on Assessment and State Standards (SCASS) and the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO).

Purpose

The purpose of the forum on accommodations was to address the challenging issues that still exist, despite the many years since the 1997 requirement in federal law to provide accommodations to students with disabilities during state and district-wide assessments (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997). The primary goal of the forum was to provide state representatives and other interested parties with an opportunity to meet and share their perspectives on accommodations and the vision of the future of accommodations within the context of changing assessment systems. This topic is particularly important as the nation focuses on the development of assessment systems by the Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

The specific focus of the forum was to discuss three issues related to accommodations in the 21st century:

1. Technology-based assessments

2. Assessment best practices versus testing accommodations

3. Accommodations versus modifications

Each of these issues was defined for the participants and a set of guiding questions provided. The time for discussion was short and discussions were intense. The agenda for the two-hour forum was as follows:

- Welcome (Sandra Warren, CCSSO, and Martha Thurlow, NCEO)

- Break-out Sessions (with short introductions)

  - Technology: How do technology-based assessments affect our approach to accommodations? (facilitated by Sheryl Lazarus, NCEO)

  - Best Practices and Accommodations: Where do assessment best practices end and accommodations begin? (facilitated by Laurene Christensen, NCEO)

  - Accommodations and Modifications: Where do accommodations end and modifications begin? (facilitated by Ross Moen, NCEO)

- Reporting Out

- Wrapping Up

Structure of This Report

Although this report summarizes the introductory information provided to forum participants, its main purpose is to describe the forum breakout session discussions themselves. In addition to facilitators to guide each breakout session, recorders noted comments on flip charts and note takers entered comments into computers. One state person per breakout group served as the reporter for the group, to report back to the whole group on the main points in discussions. Summaries for the discussions were developed from these notes.

This report first summarizes the introductory material provided to participants, and then presents a summary of the discussion in each breakout session. Discussions in each breakout session addressed the following four questions:

1. What are the issues and implications for the topic?

2. What are we learning from current/recent research and practice?

3. What are we finding out that we did not previously know?

4. What research, policies, and resources are needed?

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

Session Introduction

Dr. Sandra Warren, ASES SCASS Advisor, provided an overview of the forum and an overview of current accommodations issues. She also provided basic definitions for the discussion groups to use to ensure that everyone used the same terms to mean the same things.

Current Accommodation Issues. Accommodations are a critical part of ensuring accessibility by students with disabilities to instruction and (state and district-wide) assessments. This is increasingly important with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; see www.corestandards.org), which form the basis for new student-centered assessment and accountability systems aligned to college and career readiness goals. Assessments, under development by four assessment consortia (i.e., Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers [PARCC], SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium [SBAC], Dynamic Learning Maps General Supervision Enhancement Grant [DLM], and National Center and State Collaborative General Supervision Enhancement Grant [NCSC]), will be based on 21st century technologies. As a result, the education community needs to carefully analyze current research, policy, and practice related to accommodations – what they are, who is eligible, and how they should be used.

Definitions. The definitions appearing in the 2011 draft of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* were provided to serve as a basis for the breakout session discussions. In the 2011 draft of the *Standards*, the terms "accommodations" and "modifications" are differentiated in meaning.

Accommodations are defined as changes to test content, format, or administration conditions for particular test takers that do not change the construct being measured but do remove construct-irrelevant contributions to test scores that would otherwise exist for these individuals. *Modifications* are defined as changes in test content, format, and/or administration conditions that are made to increase accessibility for some individuals but which affect the construct measured and, consequently, result in scores that differ in meaning from scores from the unmodified assessment.

Setting the Stage for Breakout Session Discussions

Dr. Martha Thurlow, NCEO Director, noted that although the definitions in the *Standards* may be the best definitions that exist for the field at this point, they have some points of contention. She also noted that the distinctions implied by the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* are not so clean when it comes to actual practice. Clearly, some of the specifics about the definitions could be argued.

Given that background, she then set the stage for the breakout session discussions. She indicated that part of what should be done in breakout discussions was to raise questions, particularly ones that will help in thinking about the future of accommodations and modifications, within and outside technology-based systems, as well as some of the issues and concerns underlying these concepts.

How Do Technology-based Assessments Affect
Our Approach to Accommodations?

This discussion centered on the new possibilities and innovative thinking that technology-based assessments bring to the accommodations landscape, along with the importance of a common understanding among all stakeholders as to what an accommodation is in this new landscape. Participants in this breakout group discussion represented multiple professional backgrounds, including: researchers, staff from various specialties within State Departments of Education, and test developers. Participants in this group also represented states in both the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for the Assessment for College and Career Readiness (PARCC) consortium. This variety of participants offered both rich reflection on the opportunities and questions that technology-based assessments present, as well as a better understanding of the multiple perspectives that exist among stakeholders and the importance of a common understanding as we move toward common core standards. The following highlights key themes from participant response to the questions that were used across all of the breakout sessions.

Question 1: What are the issues and implications regarding how technology-based assessments affect our approach to accommodations?

As consortia and states move to technology-based assessments opportunities are presented for improving the processes and procedures for providing accommodations to students who require them. Along with a sense of opportunity and possibility about allowing each student to show what he or she knows, also comes a revisiting of what we have been doing around accommodations and what accommodations really are. Questions are emerging as to what an accommodation is in technology-based assessments, how and when teachers make accommodations decisions for technology-based assessments, and how instruction in the classroom is affected.

Theme 1 – New conversation is happening around what an accommodation is in technology-based assessments.

- There are many flexible approaches to challenging situations that we take for granted. One participant posited this analogy: If you take a standardized test and you are left-handed, and the mouse is on the right side of the computer, do you need an accommodation? Several participants concurred, citing examples of times in which we, as educators, force kids into unnatural situations and then say that an accommodation is necessary: "We've created an artificial environment that is not germane to the way they

have learned. We need to change the testing environment as opposed to thinking that we need to provide them with an accommodation."

- Participants questioned specific accommodations, suggesting that some of them (e.g., large print) are artifacts of the mode in which we have been historically testing students. Participants suggested that we need to think about the physical and sensory interactions and supporting variations in students' cognitive functionalities. Some participants thought that accommodations might go away: "We are now talking about accessibility vs. accommodations" and "Wouldn't it be great if accommodations could all just go away?" There was also a discussion of how from a student-centered point of view, you want the student to be able to show what he or she knows on the test, and how teachers are starting to realize the importance of appropriate accommodations decisions because they are realizing that some students cannot display their knowledge without accommodations.

- One participant highlighted one of the most commonly used accommodations, "extended time," and questioned this kind of thinking in a technology-based assessment environment. The argument was that this kind of accommodation should rather be an existing pedagogical option for all learners – perhaps called "self-pacing" – and built into the test-taking procedures. There was discussion about whether extended time differed between paper/pencil tests and technology-based tests because it is outside the technology platform.

- Participants thought that it was worth noting that the move toward technology-based accommodations will change the test administration manual, training for teachers, and decisions about what to do.

- Participants noted the implications of the common-core state standards and the standardization of assessments across states and consortia. They stressed making sure that the right people at the item-development level are "at the table."

- Technology is helping us move to a world where it is much easier to individualize and tailor the learning experience. There was much discussion on the part of participants about the role that accommodations play in a new technologically savvy world. They questioned how to ensure that each assessment allows for each student to show what they are really able to do.

  o Example of a deaf student: Maybe the technology-based assessment comes with/allows for the directions to be signed to the student. Is this an accommodation? However, let us say that student comes in and does not know ASL; he or she only knows the French version…and that's not part of the

     technology-based platform. Now, does the student need an accommodation? Is an accommodation outside of/other than what is automatically offered? A session participant stated, "Being able to personalize your environment is really important. There are preferences and there are accommodations."

     o Example of a student with a visual impairment: What about a kid with a visual impairment who can only access the test if the font is larger? In a technology-based world, how can we ensure that this kid makes appropriate decisions? We may have to develop a larger screen for that child. If we identify certain new accommodations, we might have to design better learning environments. We still have to make sure that when we remove barriers, we are not creating new ones.

- Participants noted the need for accommodations to be provided in different ways for the high school student versus the 3rd grade child.

- On several occasions participants stressed student self-advocacy: Students must also know how they can demonstrate what they know; students need to know what their accommodations are and how to access them.

Theme 2 – New technological possibilities are prompting questions as to how and when teachers make accommodations decisions for technology-based assessments.

- Participants thought that a main area of concern has to do with when decisions are made for technology-based accommodations and who makes those decisions and when the online platform is first accessed: One participant said, "Hopefully prior to testing day!" Participants stressed the need for tracking accommodations decision making and developing a plan that includes processes and decision making prior to the day of the test. Students need to know how to access the online environment; if they see the laundry list (of accommodations) for the first time when they sit down to take the test, they could really struggle.

- A participant stated an awareness of IEP teams that check off every accommodation possible for students and stressed that teachers need to actually test whether the accommodations are working: "The onus is on the teachers to evaluate how effective the accommodations are."

- Participants expressed a hope that because technology seems to be more engaging for students, the students themselves will become more involved in what works for them and can work with teachers to correctly identify their own accommodations.

- Participants expressed frustration with "old" thinking: "We're trying to put things into guidelines we have always had." In the same conversation, they indicated that the

importance of the test score being accurate is a primary goal of accommodations decision making and in moving forward with innovative thinking, this should not be lost.

Theme 3 – Technology features that are embedded in tests are changing instruction in the classroom.

- Participants observed how new technology featured bring the focus back to instruction and expressed the need to align instruction and testing. They noted instruction should drive assessment but ironically, attention is being brought back to instruction because of the technology-based changes to the assessment environment.

- Participants expressed concern that students arrive to their test and face a host of new accommodations not previously available to them during instruction. Teachers are now being forced to think about what they are doing in instruction throughout the year and the implication is that teaching practices (and use of accommodations) are changing as a result of technology-based tests.

- Participants highlighted a need for improved teacher training. One state has started to offer courses on technology for teachers and for everybody on the IEP team. It was also stressed this technology has to be consistently available throughout the year.

- Participants noted the positive impact on students that could come with a more consistent alignment of instructional and testing accommodations in that it could result in both raising and aligning teachers' expectations for students.

- Some participants posed questions related to the cognitive functioning of the brain: Does the understanding/ "brain-work" generalize when you remove the tools? If you take away tools, does the construct change because the child can't answer it?

- Sometimes accommodations are dependent on a particular tool. A teacher teaches a concept with a particular tool and the student demonstrates that he or she understands. But when the student encounters that same concept in the assessment with a slightly different tool and it is mixed with other concepts, the student does not understand it (e.g., the calculator - Student needs to see 4 different calculators mixed with various concept deliveries to understand how to use this tool effectively).

- Participants cautioned against blaming technologies for problems when these very problems actually stem from a lack of instruction.

Question 2: What are we learning from current or recent research and practice?

Research is helping us think both more generally about what motivates students and the link to accommodations and assessment, as well as specifically about how to apply accommodations in the online testing environment. There are many possibilities that come with technology and participants agreed that we need to consider and use next generation technology rather than simply transferring what has been done on paper to an online platform.

Theme 1 – We are learning that technology-based assessments are opening up new accommodations possibilities as well as simultaneously encouraging us to revisit and question what we have been doing relative to both instructional and assessment accommodations.

- "We are learning patience." Participants suggested that when the possibilities are great and their implications unknown, people need to be patient and allow for time and space to think innovatively. CAST was cited as having an online database with an extensive list of accommodations because of their research. One participant said that organizations like CAST need to be at the table in order to capitalize on what technology has to offer with online testing: "Rather than applying UDL to an early version of online platforms, we need to consider and utilize cutting edge technology."

- Participants touched on the theme of building flexibility into the program by personalizing the testing experience "on-demand" and enabling UD elements in the moment: "You want the student to be able to interact in a more authentic manner." There is less need for accommodations when an assessment has more UD elements.

- Technology is expanding the way in which a question is delivered and knowledge is measured. A participant noted that technology is allowing for new possibilities in the kinds of question that can be asked on a test.

- The participants agreed that what we have learned things from the alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards (AA-MAS) that can help us understand what we can do better within the realm of possibilities that technology is opening up for us. Several participants spoke of the lessons that can be learned from those states that have implemented an AA-MAS. There are many cases in which students were not provided access instructionally to content, and therefore performed poorly on the test. The AA-MAS is also helping teachers learn to open their repertoire of accommodations because they need them now to access the curriculum. Teachers are forced to go into their practices to make decisions about accommodations.

- Participants speculated that the next generation of assessment will include animation and simulation which may pose challenges and issues of access for the blind and visually impaired.

Theme 2 – Current research and practice are telling us that we need to have conversations that bring folks into agreement relative to what we are meaning to assess.

- Participants questioned the construct to be measured in a test, and the need for clarification as to whether content or skills are to be assessed. The "read-aloud" was mentioned as an accommodation that provokes good thought about what is to be measured in a reading assessment: For example, for an item, is the construct of interest decoding or comprehension? "If you care about decoding text, then a 'read-aloud' is not appropriate whereas if it is reading comprehension that you are after, then a 'read-aloud' may be appropriate."

- Participants further questioned what the assessment of certain content areas really requires and the need for coming to some kind of consensus in a new educational environment that is focusing in on common-core standards. Is writing about communicating? Is reading about being able comprehend? What is a writing test really about?

- When discussing what is instructional, it is important to think about reading and writing across the curriculum. Participants discussed the responsibility on the educator's part, to ensure that when a child graduates, that child is able to read and write effectively.

- We have the components and ability to have base-line data, accommodations data, instructional data, and assessment data all talking to one another. Participants suggested that all data should be coordinated so as to understand better what has been done around accommodations decision making.

Questions 3 and 4: What are we finding out that we did not know before? What do we need to do --- in terms of research, policies, and resources?

Discussion of Questions 3 & 4 is combined here because of the nature of the conversation that followed. Research can show us what is effective and why it needs to be happening congruently with policy decisions related to common standards. In discussing what "we are finding out that

we did not know before," discussion naturally turned to the current context of common-core standards in a multiple consortia environment and the policy issues therein. The forum came to a close before the participants had time to fully discuss these two questions.

Theme 1 – Given that states are in multiple consortia with multiple policies, there are policy issues that need to be resolved.

- Participants highlighted the states that have implemented APIP (Accessible Portable Item Profile) – APIP helps standardize products between vendors and can provide a way with tech-based assessments to code accessibility features that are included.

- Participants hoped that in seeking "common" decisions between states in a consortium, benefits that research has shown us will not be lost.

- Participants observed a need for more data and the need for a "common" learning process that informs us about what has worked prior to taking the test. They suggested that cognitive labs can tell us a lot about what works.

- There are equity issues for access to computers for students. Participants noted that students in poorer districts may not have as many computers in schools or access to computers at home. Work needs to be done in getting schools up to speed with the same technological standards.

- Participants noted that the group's conversation seemed geared toward the regular assessment and AA-MAS, but could also be relevant for the 1% kid, as technology-based accommodations can serve this population too. There is research about this population relative to technology: "But we don't know what we don't know. There are many unknowns. "

Theme 2 – While solving some issues, the use of technology may also bring a whole new set of issues.

- Participants expressed concern for some students in the alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards who might be able to easily access an online interface.

- In some states, the paper test is an accommodation and participants noted that this is a potential issue with a new set of challenges, relative to adaptive testing, because paper tests have a static set of items.

- Technology exists but participants noted budgetary restraints that may not allow many states and districts to capitalize on the latest technological possibilities.

- Participants questioned whether there is planning or thinking around allowing students to use their own technology during assessment. A participant said, "We want students to be able to control their own environment!" Other participants wondered about issues such as test security and equity.

- Research is being done around common technological tools such as the ipad, and thinking about accessibility. New issues may emerge from this kind of research.

- Technology can pose new issues around construct irrelevant variance and participants questioned whether the computer based platform may actually introduce new challenges that are yet unknown.

Where Do Assessment Best Practices End and Accommodations Begin?

The discussion about the boundary between (a) good practices that should be available for all students, and (b) accommodations, emphasized the purpose of accommodations relative to assessments. Although the primary focus of this breakout group was not technology-based assessments, much of the discussion was framed in terms of a shift toward the provision of accommodations when assessments can be given in a technology-based platform.

Participants in this breakout group discussion represented multiple professional backgrounds, including: researchers, staff from various specialties within State Departments of Education, and test developers. Participants in this group also represented states in both the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for the Assessment for College and Career Readiness (PARCC) consortium. This variety in participants helped us reflect on broad issues about the intersection of good practices for instruction and assessment and accommodations:

- What is crucial as we move toward technology-based assessments?
- What research and policies do we need?
- How can professional development support teachers, IEP teams, and English language learners (ELL) teams in making the best decisions for students who need accommodations?

The following summary highlights key themes from participant responses to Forum questions.

Question 1: What are the issues and implications regarding the distinction between accommodations and good practices that should be available to all students?

As consortia and states are moving to technology-based assessments, there is an opportunity to rethink policies and practices about the provision of accommodations. In many cases, technology facilitates the provision of accommodations, yet, new questions emerge.

Theme 1 – Identification of best practices in applying accommodations for instruction is critical to this analysis.

- There is a need to make sure that accommodations for both students with disabilities and English language learners are addressed from the start of the process (e.g., GSEGs and consortia)

- Teachers and state policymakers are trying to do what they think is best for kids in making decisions about accommodations. However, we do not know enough about how much teachers really use the decision-making materials that are provided by states.

- In general, there should be fewer accommodations and more good practices available to all students.

Theme 2 – Implementation of Common Core State Standards, Race to the Top Assessment consortia, and a focus on college and career readiness are essential components.

- As we move to thinking more about college and career readiness, the stakes might become higher for some students. Accommodations should help students be successful beyond the assessment, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams should consider accommodations with the student's future in mind (e.g., using speech to text instead of a human scribe).

- Standardizing accommodations is an important consideration for consortia. Issues to consider with regard to standardization include understanding the type of assessment and its intended purpose as well as the population of students who may use accommodations. Furthermore, comparability will be an issue that consortia will need to address.

Theme 3 – Accommodations and technology-based assessments increasingly closely linked.

- Although new assessments in technology-based platforms can use the Accessible Portable Item Profile (APIP) and build the provision of accommodations into the test environment, there will always be a need for accommodations.

- Access to technology may pose a barrier in providing assessments using technology-based platforms. States shared examples of power outages and limited access to the Internet in rural areas. Other states mentioned that there were schools that provided laptops to all students or developed policies that encouraged schools to use technology money to ensure that the schools had the capacity to deliver assessments via computer.

Question 2: What are we learning from current research and practice?

In general, the group had more questions than answers. However, there were examples from states that demonstrated areas in which what had previously been considered accommodations were now being applied as good practices for all students.

Theme 1 – Federal policies have had an impact on what we know.

- Accountability is driving instruction. The question was asked, "Who is driving what? Is assessment driving instruction or is instruction driving what is on the state assessments?"

- Some states that have developed Alternate Assessments based on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) found that most of the changes in that assessment were actually "best practices."

Theme 2 – Read aloud accommodations may have benefits worthy of additional consideration.

- Read aloud has value for more students than those who have it as an IEP accommodation.

- When standardized through technology, this access tool can have benefits for many students (e.g., students may learn how to pronounce unfamiliar words, or they might not be familiar with the spelling of a word they have heard, etc).

Question 3: What are we finding out that we did not previously know?

A few states in the group had already moved from a paper/pencil form of an assessment to a technology-based assessment. Many of the "lessons learned" that were discussed by the group were in relation to the implementation of computer-based assessments in these states.

Theme 1 – The role of the paper/pencil assessment is changing with 21st century assessments.

- Paper/pencil versions of an assessment may need to become an accommodation as we move to technology-based assessments.
- There is evidence from a state that a paper/pencil form is used infrequently and only for students who have a disability that relates to the use of a computer monitor.

Theme 2 – Twenty-first century assessments pose new accessibility and logistic considerations.

- Students who want to access an assessment via Braille are usually still able to provide answers via the computer.

- Some challenges in providing accommodations involve logistics (e.g., having enough people who can administer a read aloud accommodation). As we move to technology-based assessment platforms, these logistical challenges may be eliminated or, at least, different.

Question 4: What research, policies, and resources are needed?

The group had several suggestions in response to this question. There was consensus that more information needs to be provided to states and consortia so that they can develop well-informed

policies about the provision of accommodations. Support for professional development is a resource that was widely supported by the group. Finally, the group had several suggestions for further research.

Theme 1 – Policy and accountability research is critical to 21ˢᵗ century assessments.

- States want more information on the intersection between accountability and assessment. States want more information of this type so that they can make better-informed policy decisions.

- Monitoring accommodations needs to be built into the assessment process. As assessments are currently administrated, it is hard to know if a student really receives the accommodations that are on the IEP. This leads to a question of whether the assessment is valid for that student.

Theme 2 – Research on professional development will enhance the emerging assessment frameworks.

- More professional development for decision-making teams is needed. If we can better understand the thought process of IEP teams as they are determining accommodations, we may be able to improve the materials we provide them. For example, in one state, there may be a change in accommodations provided to the student when the stakes are higher (e.g., having to take a graduation test). In addition, we do not know enough about how teachers use the materials that states provide. Is there a way to provide incentives to teachers so that they read and use the materials?

- Similarly, there is a need to help teachers make effective decisions and transfer those decisions to assessment accommodations. An example was given that a teacher might choose a small group administration for a student when the student really needs to have minimized distractions.

- More support for thinking through how to provide portfolio assessments in a technology-based environment was mentioned.

Theme 3 – Twenty-first century assessments offer numerous research opportunities.

- Directions for future research included the following:
  - Test security.
  - Accommodations for certain groups of students. This research could help teachers believe that their kids are fairly assessed. Research might include

accommodations such as brailler or tactile graphics. Research on the use of an avatar to provide sign interpretation was also indicated as needed.

o   The effectiveness of accommodations so that decision makers can know that the accommodation is having the intended effect for the student.

o   Accommodations for ELLs with disabilities.

o   Test formats in general. Do technology-based assessment platforms have an effect on student performance? Is there a difference in the use of accommodations for formative versus summative assessments?

o   In some states, an access tool may be considered an accommodation, but in another state it may be considered a best practice. States would like to see research on the impact of providing similar access tools to all students versus only to students who have an IEP.

Where Do Accommodations End and Modifications Begin?

The definition of accommodations proposed for the new edition of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* is: "changes to test content, format or administration conditions for particular test takers that do not change the construct being measured but do remove construct-irrelevant contributions to test scores that would otherwise exist for these individuals." Changes that do not meet these criteria would be considered modifications instead of accommodations. Although this definition of the boundary between accommodations and modifications was not in earlier editions of the *Standards*, it has been widely accepted for many years in work on assessing students with disabilities and students who are English language learners.

The discussion that looked at this definition of the boundary between accommodations and modifications examined the clarity and utility of the definition and touched on options and implications for continuing or changing current practice. Not counting the facilitator and note takers, there were 16 participants in this breakout discussion group. Members of the group represented multiple professional backgrounds, including: researchers, test developers, staff from various specialties within State Departments of Education, and staff from school districts.

The following summary highlights key themes from participant responses to the Forum questions. Similar considerations seemed to be raised across all four questions, so, to the extent possible, this report traces the same five themes across the four common questions. Where little was said about a particular theme in the context of one of the questions, this is noted.

Question 1: What are the issues regarding the distinction between accommodations and modifications and the implications of keeping or changing the existing definition?

More of the discussion was spent talking about this first question, in particular describing issues with the current definition, than was spent on any of the other three questions. Most of the themes that arose during the discussion of issues and implications could also be seen in the remaining three questions.

Theme 1 – The current definition of accommodations has a number of strengths.

- The language of constructs and construct irrelevant variance is very familiar to measurement specialists.

- The current definition of accommodations meshes with familiar definitions of validity such that any adaptation that meets the criteria to be an accommodation should raise no concerns about undermining the validity of a test.

- The definition seems to provide a clear boundary that measurement specialists can use to make unambiguous determinations about which test adjustments would qualify as accommodations.

- The current definition has been in use long enough that most measurement specialists accept it.

- An implication of considering any change to the definition of what is accepted as an accommodation is the turmoil in the field that might be expected to result from changing long-standing practices.

Theme 2 – There are challenges in implementing or adhering to the current definition of accommodations when tests are being administered.

- Much of this session's discussion dwelt on issues related to teacher decision making regarding the use of accommodations by students. Participants commented on the gap in knowledge among teachers and other educators relative to what constructs are, how they appear within instruction, and ultimately how they play out in things such as standardized assessments used for accountability purposes.

- Given difficulty understanding the construct being assessed, difficulty determining who might benefit from any given accommodation, and a desire to see their students do well, teachers sometimes are disposed to give every available accommodation to every student who has a disability, even when students have not yet demonstrated a specific need for the accommodation.

- In their desire for their students to do well, teachers sometimes go further than giving all students all accommodations by making adjustments in test administration that fall outside the parameters of approved accommodations.

- The way accommodations are defined and implemented has double sided implications for teachers and instruction:

  o Teachers and students may suffer undesirable consequences if permitted accommodations are insufficient to let some students show what they know. Teachers and schools may not get credit for what they have helped students learn and students may be required to spend instructional time on things that are not helpful for the students. For example, requiring that reading tests include a decoding component may cause students who have reading disabilities to be trapped in drill-and-kill low level reading exercises.

o The mirror image implication of the preceding point is that if accommodations are permitted that are too lenient, test requirements could be watered down in a way that lets weak instructional and learning practices to slide through. Following the example above, eliminating a decoding component from reading tests might undermine efforts to strengthen students' ability to decode.

- The challenges cited above in teachers' test administration practices have implications for states. States need to be aware of how accommodations are used during test administration and find ways of addressing issues of over-selection and mis-use of accommodations during test administration.

Theme 3 – It may be more appropriate to associate constructs with individual items than with entire tests.

- Several participants commented that constructs may be better thought of at the level of individual items in a test rather than at a more macro level encompassing the entire test. Accommodations associated with entire tests may align poorly with the needs of students at the level of individual items. The use of calculators was given as one example. Calculators may be appropriately helpful for some items, irrelevant or even harmful for student performance on other items, and inappropriately harmful to test validity on other items. Consequently, for some tests, rules about using calculators as an accommodation need to be made at the item level instead of being established for an entire test.

- The notion of item-level construct specification is at odds with procedures states often follow. It is common to identify and develop accommodations as a retrofit after a test has been developed. Instead, more closely associating constructs and accommodations with test items would lead to building in appropriate supports matched to student characteristics during the item writing stage of test development.

Theme 4 – There may be some challenges to the language of constructs and construct irrelevant variance.

- One question about the rule on changing only construct irrelevant variance was whether that rule implies that accommodations can make absolutely no change to construct relevant variance. If some construct relevant variance may be changed, how much may be changed?

- Another line of questions asked how clearly defined constructs are. For example, do math tests in different grades and different states that are designed to measure performance on

different standards all measure the same construct or does every test measure a different construct? Or, following an earlier theme, does each item measure a different construct?

- Related to the issue of defining a construct is the issue of re-defining a construct. The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* talks about the possibility that test research may point to a need to change a construct, but it gives little guidance on the procedures or parameters for changing a construct. Is the current accommodations definition a tool for maintaining the status quo in that all subsequent tests must correlate highly with some earlier test?

- Given that the current definition of accommodations is tied closely to a particular way of talking about validity, what would the implication be for accommodations work if other ways of talking about validity replaced current modes? Early treatments of validity had relegated discussion of constructs to one kind of particularly messy validity. Might new treatments of validity move constructs to a less central role?

Theme 5 – What can we say about test adaptations that are not accommodations?

- Is every adaptation that is not an accommodation considered a modification?

- Might tests that have modifications instead of accommodations still be useful? Can they provide valid measures of some aspect of student achievement? If so, what value might that have? And for whom?

Question 2: What lessons are we learning from current research and practice?

Most of the discussion of lessons learned from current research and practice dwelt on themes 2, 3 and 4, but some observations about themes 1 and 5 could also be gleaned.

Theme 1 – The current definition of accommodations has a number of strengths.

- A clear strength of the current definition is the progress in the identification and use of accommodations that has been made through research using this definition of accommodations.

Theme 2 – There are challenges in implementing or adhering to the current definition of accommodations when tests are being administered.

- There is a disconnect between classroom practices and research emphases that keeps researchers from benefitting from the knowledge and experiences of teachers and that keeps teachers from buying in to and embracing research findings. An example one

participant shared of how a state bridges this divide was that the state's department of education field tests accommodations that teachers submit from their classroom experience. In this way teachers are aware of participating in identifying allowed accommodations and the state's education department research arm is staying abreast of classroom instruction and assessment practices.

- The introduction of technology based assessments was cited as a practice that might help alleviate improper selection and implementation of accommodations.

Theme 3 – It may be more appropriate to associate constructs with individual items than with entire tests.

- The use of cognitive labs and read aloud studies are improving our understanding of how students engage with or respond to different types of test items as well as their experiences with specific accommodations.

Theme 4 – There may be some challenges to the language of constructs and construct irrelevant variance.

- Some accommodations research suggests that a rule about changing only construct irrelevant variance is less clear than one might think. For example, the "differential boost" research paradigm accepts, as valid accommodations, test adaptations that change the scores of students without disabilities as long as the scores of students with disabilities increase significantly more.

- Other kinds of evidence about when a construct has been changed besides changes in test scores can produce ambiguous results. Factor analytic studies can demonstrate similar factor structures between tests with and without adaptations that experts in the field still reject as the same construct. An example of this can be found in research on reading tests administered with and without a "read aloud" auditory presentation.

- Recent work in validity theory has reduced talking about constructs in favor of an emphasis on evidence-based arguments about the extent to which tests support accurate interpretations.

Theme 5 – What can we say about test adaptations that are not accommodations?

- Recent research on Alternate Assessments on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) can both confuse and illuminate the question about test adaptations that are not accommodations. Confusion can arise because the term "modified" in AA-MAS is referring to modification of a standard rather than the modification of a test. Illumination may be found because when a test adaptation is not accepted as an accommodation, one option is to treat the changed test as a measure of something other than the original construct. Thus, a modified test might provide a valid measure of a modified construct.

Question 3: What are we finding out that we did not previously know?

The discussion of finding things we did previously know paralleled much of the discussion about lessons being learned from research and practice. Again, most of the discussion involved themes 2, 3, and 4.

Theme 1 – The current definition of accommodations has a number of strengths.

- Given a relatively long history of observing the value of the definition of accommodations, no comments in the discussion suggested information about strengths of this definition that was not previously known.

Theme 2 – There are challenges in implementing or adhering to the current definition of accommodations when tests are being administered.

- Test administrators and decision-making teams, in attempting to help students "be successful" at times make choices about adaptations that may modify assessments in a way that lowers standards and that limit the student's opportunity to show what he or she knows on assessments of grade level standards.

- With the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and increased performance expectations there is significant pressure to have better research that supports making better decisions for students regarding both accommodations and assessment participation.

Theme 3 – It may be more appropriate to associate constructs with individual items than with entire tests.

- Item developers, special education staff, and technology people need to work together as is being done with Accessible Portable Item Profile (APIP) because these issues are more complex than we thought (i.e., a construct may apply to items instead of a whole test). This means more thoughtfulness is needed at the item content level to develop accommodations per item and avoid mismatches with the ways in which students approach problems and effective instructional practices.

Theme 4 – There may be some challenges to the language of constructs and construct irrelevant variance.

- The definition of accommodations as changing construct irrelevant variance and not changing the construct may be less clear and firm than people have thought.

Theme 5 – What can we say about test adaptations that are not accommodations?

- Although recent research on Alternate Assessments on Modified Achievement Standards (AA-MAS) might have been cited to talk about new learnings regarding test modifications, given the time available, the group discussion did not take up this topic.

Question 4: What research, policies, and resources are needed?

The group was less focused on identifying future needs that might help resolve issues than it was on describing issues. Again, themes 2, 3, and 4 received more attention than themes 1 and 5.

Theme 1 – The current definition of accommodations has a number of strengths.

- A number of observations cited in other themes below, might contribute to strengthening the value of the current definition. There might be work directed toward showing the value of the current definition if states include information showing how and why that definition has value as part of their efforts to improve staff development in the use of accommodations.

Theme 2 – There are challenges in implementing or adhering to the current definition of accommodations when tests are being administered.

- Participants noted the need for better tracking of accommodations use relative to specific constructs during assessment administrations. This effort could support new research to understand the impacts of a catchall approach, in which states create a laundry list of accommodations and teachers check all the accommodations that are available, in contrast to the recommended targeted approach in which accommodations are chosen because they have been shown to work for this particular student. This research would document the ways in which the catchall approach may not support appropriate accommodations use based on the constructs being assessed.

- Participants also emphasized the need to improve teacher professional development opportunities related to the purposes, uses, and selection of appropriate accommodations to support team decision making.

Theme 3 – It may be more appropriate to associate constructs with individual items than with entire tests.

- Several participants highlighted the need to break down the silos and hierarchies that exist among the various fields working on accommodations and modifications issues. Such efforts could lead to accommodations at the specific item level, better matches with effective and appropriate instructional practices, uses of technology based assessments and instructional experiences, and incorporation of universal design principles.

Theme 4 – There may be some challenges to the language of constructs and construct irrelevant variance.

- Some participants thought that additional studies on accommodations that yield consistent results related to accommodations use and construct irrelevant variance are needed. For example, sharper distinctions between students in the accommodated and non-accommodated groups in studies might reveal more clearly whether construct relevant variance has been changed.

- Consider adjusting the definition of accommodations to explicitly allow for some construct relevant variance to be changed if that is necessary to remove variance that is even more relevant to a disability.

- Consider moving away from language that is couched in terms of constructs and adopting instead newer language about validity that emphasizes improving evidence to support more accurate interpretations (of student learning).

- Consider adopting language that ties accommodations to test validity without embracing a particular formulation of validity. Such language might be as simple as "Accommodations are adaptations that do not impair a test's ability to provide valid measurements."

Theme 5 – What can we say about test adaptations that are not accommodations?

- Although little was said in the discussion about future research on test adaptions that are not accommodations, there seems to be room for more research, distinct from work on Alternate Assessments based on Modified Achievement Standards, about what if any potential benefits there might be to doing more with test modifications.

Discussion

The forum on accommodations generated many interesting comments and indications that challenging issues still exist. The comments summarized in this document provide important fodder for states and for the Race-to-the-Top Assessment Consortia as they revise, improve, and develop their policies and practices surrounding assessment accommodations. Thoughtfully considering, and then addressing, the issues raised by forum participants will help to ensure that the Consortia and states provide meaningful access for students with disabilities.