Center for American Progress

Better Tests, Fewer Barriers

Advances in Accessibility through PARCC and Smarter Balanced

By Samantha Batel and Scott Sargrad   February 2016

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Introduction and summary

English language learners and students with disabilities make up more than 20 percent of public school enrollment.[1] In the 2012-13 school year, an estimated 4.4 million public school students were identified as English language learners.[2] That same school year, 6.4 million children and youth in the United States received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, or EHA.[3] And the most recent data show that nearly 740,000 students across the country have Section 504 plans under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which provide students with disabilities educational services such as accommodations.[4]

Given these numbers, it is critical that students with disabilities and English language learners have the same opportunities as their peers to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and receive appropriate supports to meet their needs. In fact, 98 percent of schools have at least one student with a disability, and 74 percent of schools have at least one student who is an English language learner.[5] Accordingly, schools must ensure that each and every student is making progress.

Indeed, for the past 50 years, the federal government has increasingly supported the education of students with disabilities and English language learners, starting with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, or ESEA; the Bilingual Education Act of 1968; and EHA.[6] The Improving America's Schools Act—the 1994 reauthorization of ESEA—required states to assess the reading and mathematics performance of all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, and report disaggregated results.[7] And in 1997, IDEA required that states include students with disabilities in statewide and districtwide assessments, with individual accommodations as needed.[8]

The No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB—the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA—increased state accountability for students with disabilities and English language learners by requiring annual assessments. It also instructed states and districts to take action when these groups of students were not making progress.[9] With

these requirements came increased testing accommodation polices to ensure that students with disabilities and English language learners fully participated under fair testing conditions.[10]

The most recent reauthorization of ESEA was signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015. The Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, requires that assessments be valid, reliable, and fair for all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners. It also preserves the annual assessment and accommodation requirements of NCLB.[11]

Testing accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners serve to increase access to exam materials, settings, or procedures without changing what the assessment measures. Common accommodations for students with disabilities include extended test-taking time, dictated response, large print, Braille, the use of a sign language interpreter, and assistive technology devices.[12] English language learners may receive translation support through bilingual glossaries, directions read aloud or translated into their native language, or a side-by-side bilingual version of the test.[13] Notably, policies and guidelines that pertain to test accessibility vary across states, and some, such as those for read-aloud features, face controversy as states strive to balance equity and maintaining the meaning and integrity of test scores.[14]

New assessments aligned to college- and career-ready standards are a major step forward in accessibility and accommodation features for students with disabilities and English language learners. Designed by two consortia of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, or Smarter Balanced—these tests include items and tasks designed with all students in mind. PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams also include built-in features and innovative approaches to accessibility resources that are tailored to students' needs.

Although there is room for improvement, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced test designs represent tremendous progress. As state, local, and other leaders develop and administer future generations of assessments, a heightened focus on accessibility, proper implementation, improved technology, and ensuring access to accommodations will benefit all learners.

Moving toward better assessments

Beginning in 2009, states set about developing and adopting the Common Core State Standards, a set of rigorous expectations for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level from kindergarten to 12th grade to ensure that they are on track for success in college and careers. Currently, 42 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity are implementing these standards.[15]

As part of the transition to these new, higher standards, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium developed high-quality assessments aligned to the Common Core. Through the Race to the Top Assessment Program authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the U.S. Department of Education awarded these two groups of states grants to develop a new generation of tests. In September 2010, PARCC received $170 million and Smarter Balanced received $160 million to create assessments for all learners.[16]

PARCC, originally made up of 26 states, and Smarter Balanced, initially made up of 31 states, designed computer-administered summative assessments in mathematics and English language arts, or ELA, for third through eighth grades and once in high school.[17] In February 2013, Smarter Balanced launched a pilot test of its assessment system, and in spring 2014, both Smarter Balanced and PARCC conducted extensive field tests.[18] The following year, in spring 2015, 5 million students in 12 states completed a PARCC test, and 7 million students in 18 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and select Bureau of Indian Education schools took Smarter Balanced exams.[19]

These new assessments improve on previous state tests in terms of quality, rigor, and alignment. Some former state assessments did not apply deeper learning concepts, nor did they measure the full range of state standards.[20] Additionally, approximately one-third of states administered exclusively multiple-choice tests in both reading and mathematics to students in the fourth and eighth grades.[21]

 A 2015 report by the National Network of State Teachers of the Year concluded that the Common Core-aligned assessments "represent an improvement and the right trajectory."[22] Reviewers agreed that PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments more accurately reflect the range of reading and mathematics knowledge and skills that students should master; demonstrate a full range of cognitive complexity; align with strong instructional practices; and distinguish between mid-performing and high-performing students. Reviewers also rated PARCC and Smarter Balanced as being more rigorous and grade-level appropriate.[23]

A 2016 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute underscores these findings. An expert review of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced fifth and eighth grade exams concluded that they are an "excellent" or "good" match to the Common Core ELA and mathematics standards in both content and depth. The consortia assessments also outperformed competitors, including the ACT Aspire and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, in terms of alignment to the standards.[24]

A parallel study by the Human Resources Research Organization, or HumRRO, evaluated the alignment of high school assessments to the Common Core for the same four testing programs—PARCC, Smarter Balanced, ACT Aspire, and MCAS—in addition to conducting an accessibility review. HumRRO found that not only are PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments generally more aligned to the Common Core ELA and mathematics standards in content and depth, but they also offer more accessibility features than their competitors.[25]

Indeed, PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams move beyond fill-in-the-bubble tests to not only measure critical thinking skills but also to better accommodate the needs of students with disabilities and English language learners. The computer-based systems offer advancements in universal design principles as applied to assessments that provide access for a wider range of student needs, reducing the number of students required to take exams in separate small-group or one-on-one settings.[26]

Universal design and accessibility

Universal design is a concept that can apply to everything from architecture and consumer products to education. In general, universal design considers individuals with the greatest physical and cognitive needs to create accessible products and services. Take, for example, curb cuts on sidewalks. Originally designed to accom-

modate wheelchair users, curb cuts are also useful for cyclists and pedestrians with strollers or suitcases.[27] By implementing this design on the front end, it becomes a feature rather than a fix. Identifying potential access issues in the beginning mini-mizes modifications needed on the back end, and all users benefit.

Similarly, universally designed assessments build in accommodations and support features to make them more accessible to the greatest number of students. They ensure that assessments measure student knowledge of the material being tested rather than their ability to access the test content.[28] Moreover, when assessment designers have the expectation that tests should be taken by all students, they create exams with every student in mind. This is particularly important for students with disabilities and English language learners: The goal is to provide better access for those who need additional supports.

Universal design for learning and assessment development

In the 1990s, the Center for Applied Special Technology, or CAST, a nonprofit education research and development organization, laid out the principles of universal design for learning, or UDL. UDL is a framework to improve teaching and learning that focuses on the "what," "how," and "why" of learning:

1. **The "what"—multiple means of representation:** Students comprehend information differently, so it is optimal to present material in multiple ways.

2. **The "how"—multiple means of action and expression:** Because students express their knowledge differently, it is best to provide options that allow them to communicate their level of understanding.

3. **The "why"—multiple means of engagement:** Students learn best through different means of engagement. It is therefore crucial to provide them multiple options, from working alone to collaborating with peers.

These three UDL principles are the foundation for curriculum development that provide students with an equal opportunity to learn. In 2002, the National Center on Educational Outcomes produced a set of seven universal design principles for assessment development to best measure students' knowledge:

1. **Inclusive assessment population:** Assessments should be designed with all students in mind.

2. **Precisely defined test items and tasks:** Exam questions should be designed to measure only content and to exclude all cognitive, sensory, emotional, and physical barriers.

3. **Accessible, nonbiased items:** Exam questions should be sensitive to disability and the range of students' cultural experiences.

4. **Amenable to accommodations:** Assessments should be compatible with accommodations and a variety of adaptive equipment.

5. **Simple, clear, and intuitive instructions and procedures:** Directions should use clear, understandable language.

6. **Maximum readability and comprehensibility:** Exams should use plain language that is straightforward and concise.

7. **Maximum legibility:** Tests should be designed in such a way that physical features of the test—such as type size, print contrast, and spacing—do not impede a student's focus or understanding.

Sources: National Center On Universal Design for Learning, "The Three Principles of Universal Design for Learning," available at http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl/3principles (last accessed January 2016); Sandra J. Thompson, Christopher J. Johnstone, and Martha L. Thurlow, "Universal Design Applied to Large Scale Assessments" (Minneapolis: National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2002), available at http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/onlinepubs/synthesis44.html.

Advances in universal design and accessibility through PARCC and Smarter Balanced

As grant-winning consortia, both the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium were required to develop their test items and performance tasks using the principles of universal design. The consortia strove to use these principles by avoiding biased items, such as those that unfairly penalize students based on race or gender; eliminating irrelevant features that might measure something other than the content being assessed; and identifying potential challenges upfront to avoid retrofitting accommodations at the end of the test development process.[29] The consortia also designed questions and tasks using multiple means of representation, such as graphics and charts, to accommodate students' varied learning styles and disabilities.[30]

Building on the benefits and strengths of universal design, the consortia embedded accessibility features into the testing platforms that are available to all students. Students taking Smarter Balanced exams, for example, may access an item-specific, grade-appropriate glossary. PARCC, similarly, provides a pop-up glossary for preselected words. All test takers have access to tools such as a digital notepad, calculator, and highlighter. Additional features such as bookmarking and zoom tools allow students to mark items for later review and zoom in or zoom out on text and graphics.[31] These features make test taking more dynamic and user friendly, particularly compared with paper-and-pencil exams.

Beyond universal access features, PARCC and Smarter Balanced provide additional supports for students with education-related needs, such as learning difficulties that are not considered disabilities. Test takers, for example, may activate color contrast to change the background and foreground color of their exam or select answer masking that will uncover answer options only when the student is ready. In some cases, students also may use a text-to-speech option for certain test items, in which text is read aloud via embedded technology.[32]

To increase accessibility for English language learners, Smarter Balanced provides item-specific, grade-level translated text and audio glossaries in more than 11 languages plus dialects for mathematics exams. The consortium also offers stacked Spanish-English mathematics assessments, which provide the full translation of each test item above the original item in English, and nonembedded translated test directions in 19 languages.[33]

If state policy allows, English language learners taking the PARCC exam may take an online transadaptation—a combination of translation and adaptation—of the mathematics assessment in Spanish. Unlike literal word-by-word translation, transadaptation adjusts content to match the culture of the target native language, convey meaning, and better preserve the assessment's validity.[34] PARCC also offers a text-to-speech option for the mathematics assessment in other languages, as well as written test directions in 10 languages.[35]

PARCC and Smarter Balanced provide further accommodations for students with Individualized Education Programs, or IEPs, as required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or a Section 504 plan required under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. An IEP is a plan for specialized instruction and related services for a student with a disability, while a Section 504 plan captures the accommodations that a student with a disability requires. To meet the needs of these students, the consortia provide test content translated into American Sign Language videos, computer- and paper-based Braille options, and closed captioning, among other supports.[36]

As a result of these design features, students with disabilities and English language learners are less likely to take exams in a separate room or require the support of an aide, reducing the stigma around accommodations. For example, an English language learner may wear headphones to listen to a translated glossary, another student with a reading-related disability may use headphones to hear mathematics items read aloud, and a third student may wear headphones as a noise buffer to minimize distractions—all in the same classroom. Test takers can choose which supports they need in collaboration with their teacher or IEP team in an inclusive testing environment.

Previous state assessments	PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments
• Primarily paper-and-pencil exams • Mainly multiple-choice questions • Low cognitive rigor • Did not measure the full range of state standards	• Computer-based exams • Interactive items and tasks • Rigorous and cognitively complex • Aligned to new college- and career-ready standards • Universally designed • Built-in accessibility and accommodations features • Cost effective • Adaptive (Smarter Balanced)

PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments also offer general advantages compared with traditional paper-and-pencil exams. Because these tests are designed for a computer, they present more interactive items and tasks, such as simulations and graphing, that students find engaging. These tests are also more cost effective, as electronic delivery is less expensive than printing and mailing paper exams in bulk, and they reduce the costs associated with entering and analyzing data. Further, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments are more time efficient, eliminating the need to mail tests for scoring and minimizing paperwork burdens. And both assessments offer better standardization of test administration while increasing test site security.[37]

Moreover, Smarter Balanced exams and test items are adaptive, which means that the difficulty of questions changes based on a student's previous responses in order to capture student strengths and weaknesses. This creates a customized exam for each test taker to better pinpoint his or her abilities. If a student completes most of the test and is likely to have a very low or a very high score, the assessment also may include questions that were originally written for higher or lower grades but measure the same content. This feature allows the test to identify which students are demonstrating grade-level proficiency in the content standards while further increasing its precision and allowing for better measurement of student growth from year to year.[38]

As a result, the Smarter Balanced adaptive testing model measures a wider range of student ability to a finer degree than paper-and-pencil assessments.[39] This approach can be particularly helpful for struggling students, as the test adapts to their skill level to maintain engagement and offer an opportunity for success.[40] The adaptive feature also further increases test security, as neighboring students are less likely to have the same exam.[41]

Improving inclusion through PARCC and Smarter Balanced

Amendments to IDEA made in 1997 required states to include students with disabilities in statewide and districtwide assessments or to provide an alternative assessment if the general assessment could not appropriately assess a student's performance.[42] No Child Left Behind reinforced this provision, requiring states to assess all students; hold schools accountable for student performance, including students with disabilities; and develop at least one alternate assessment.[43]

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations to help states develop and administer alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards, or AA-AAS, for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.[44] In 2007, the agency expanded this practice to allow the use of alternate assessments based on modified achievement standards, or AA-MAS, for students whose disabilities were not significant enough to qualify for AA-AAS but still prevented them from accessing the general assessments successfully.[45] These two regulations placed caps on the percentage of a state's full student population who could be counted as "proficient" under the alternate assessments at 1 percent and 2 percent, respectively.[46]

The expansion of AA-MAS created controversy in the disability community. Some advocates expressed concern about the possible over assignment of students from the general assessment to this version, and others worried that the new exams would set low expectations for students with disabilities.[47] In response to reported misuse and growing options for expanded accessibility, such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams, the Department of Education eliminated the option of administering AA-MAS in September 2015.[48]

As a result of this change, more students with disabilities have an expanded opportunity to demonstrate mastery of college- and career-ready standards on exams such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced. This transition creates the expectation of alignment between standards and assessments for all students, as test takers have access to the same content and exams.

Alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities continue to be an important component of each state's assessment system under the Every Student Succeeds Act. ESSA caps at 1 percent the percentage of students who may take these exams by subject, while NCLB regulations capped at 1 percent the percentage of students taking AA-AAS that could be counted as proficient. ESSA, accordingly, increases access to the general assessment by limiting the number of students with disabilities that states may assign to alternate exams. Further, ESSA requires states to develop alternate assessments using the principles of universal design for learning. ESSA does not, however, provide authority for states to implement AA-MAS.[49]

States already have begun to improve the quality of AA-AAS using UDL principles.[50] Alternate assessments developed by two consortia of states, Dynamic Learning Maps and the National Center and State Collaborative, provide new ways to assess the achievement of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and their readiness for success after high school. Similar to PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, these new alternate assessments are a major step forward in quality and accessibility for all students.[51]

In addition, states have developed alternate assessments for English language learners with significant cognitive disabilities. WIDA—named for original member states Wisconsin, Delaware, and Arkansas—developed an alternate version of the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners, or ACCESS for ELLs, exam. In the 2013-14 school year, 31 state educational agencies administered the Alternate ACCESS for ELLs to measure nearly 12,000 students' English language proficiency.[52]

Like achievement in English language arts and mathematics, states are accountable for English learners' language acquisition. NCLB created a separate accountability system for English language proficiency that only applied to districts and states.[53] ESSA, however, requires states to include English language proficiency in every school's accountability system, prioritizing the needs of English language learners and increasing accountability for their success.[54] The Alternate ACCESS for ELLs exam will help ensure that struggling English learners receive the support they need regardless of ability, and with a better understanding of students' language proficiency, schools will be better equipped to improve their achievement.

Challenges and future opportunities

The accessibility features and accommodations built into the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assessments are a tremendous step forward from the state exams of the past, allowing access for more learners than ever before.[55] Collaboration enabled consortia states to accomplish far more than they would have achieved individually and to bring together the nation's top thinkers to develop policy and design the highest-quality tests. By working together, states also had greater resources available to invest in accessibility and accommodation features and guidelines and to improve their practices.[56]

PARCC, for example, created a comprehensive policy document that provides guidance to districts on test administration, the availability of accessibility features and accommodations, and how to effectively select and evaluate accommodations and other test supports for students. Smarter Balanced, too, prepared usability, accessibility, and accommodations guidelines, in addition to an implementation guide. While neither consortium required unanimous agreement to support or adopt standard accommodation policies, this joint work is the first attempt to create a common and shared set of guidelines. Further, both consortia benefit from member input to update or add policies as both practice and evidence requires.[57]

PARCC and Smarter Balanced continue to improve their practices by soliciting feedback from a broad range of stakeholders and users. PARCC, for example, has administered test administrator and student surveys and assembled a review board to prioritize changes or enhancements to the testing platform and testing management site based on feedback from the field. Smarter Balanced states have built on feedback from their experience administering pilot tests, field tests, and the first year of operational assessments to identify areas for improvement. As a result of that feedback, Smarter Balanced is developing guidelines with recommendations on providing testing breaks to students.[58]

But this progress is not perfect, and there is room for improvement in implementation, technology, and available supports. Smarter Balanced guidelines, for example, should reduce variability in accommodation access and implementation, but some states have their own policies, regulations, and legislation. Implementation at the local level, accordingly, may vary.[59] Similarly, availability of transadapted PARCC mathematics assessments is inconsistent, as PARCC states have differing laws, regulations, and policies regarding native-language exams.[60]

Likewise, interoperability of the consortia testing platforms with students' assistive technology devices remains a challenge, though there is some progress in this area. Smarter Balanced, for example, is in the process of acquiring a web accessibility certification that will support greater interoperability and accessibility of web-based technology.[61] Further, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires that states' general assessments include appropriate accommodations, such as interoperability with and the ability to use assistive technology for students with disabilities.[62] Going forward, it will be important for test developers and assistive technology vendors to agree on clear and consistent standards for interoperability so students can access the assistive technology they use daily when taking assessments.[63]

Further advances in technology are needed, particularly with respect to the read-aloud features.[64] Some students, for example, struggled with the fast pace and robotic voice of the Smarter Balanced exam dictation tool in spring 2015 testing. In response, Smarter Balanced has made adjustments in this area, and in the future, students will be able to control pacing and choose a more human-sounding voice.[65] Both consortia also will need to accommodate the transition to a new Braille system, as the United States is set to implement Unified English Braille, a revised code based on current literary braille, beginning in January 2016.[66]

Additional supports for English language learners are an essential priority going forward as well. PARCC offers transadapted mathematics exams, and Smarter Balanced provides stacked translations, but only in Spanish.[67] States must request and pay for transadaptations or translations in other languages.[68] In addition, as the transadapted mathematics assessment was not field-tested, some advocates found room for improvement with the 2014-15 exam language.[69] Increased complexity of word problems compounds this challenge, as it may test skills other than mathematical knowledge, such as reading comprehension.[70]

Advocates for English language learners also have raised concerns regarding the validity and reliability of assessments written in English, as they may reflect students' English proficiency skills rather than their content knowledge.[71] Accordingly,

some argue for more native-language assessments to better measure students' subject-area comprehension.[72] Experts also advocate for increased use of culturally responsive texts that are reflective of diverse perspectives. Computer-administered assessments present an opportunity for regional adaptability going forward.[73]

In addition, computer literacy is often a challenge for this population of students, as many English language learners enter the classroom with limited technology experience, which can make navigating the online test platform challenging.[74] Compounding this problem, difficulties in communication between schools and parents of English language learners can result in students not receiving the supports they need.[75]

Computer literacy, however, is not always a unique obstacle for English language learners. Results from the 2014-15 PARCC exams, for example, found that in general, students who took the exams on a computer tended to score lower than those who took the exams with paper and pencil.[76] Discrepancies, in part, may stem from demographic and academic differences, and they do not necessarily hold true for every state, district, and school.[77] Regardless, all students will need more time and practice to adjust to online testing platforms to perform to the best of their ability.

Recommendations

While the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assessments represent a major step forward for all learners, they are not perfect. As state and local leaders and others develop and administer the next generation of assessments, they must focus on increasing accessibility and interoperability, ensuring proper implementation, improving technology, and ensuring access to accommodations. To accomplish these goals, the Center for American Progress recommends the following next steps for the future of assessments.

States should continue to implement PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams and assessment items to ensure that all students have access to high-quality assessments

Forty-two states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity are implementing the Common Core State Standards.[78] The consortia assessments aligned to these standards, however, have paid a price during legislative battles, with states often dropping the exams as a compromise.[79]

States should continue to implement PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments for their quality, rigor, and benefits for students with disabilities and English language learners. PARCC's recent move toward a more flexible approach that allows states to use specific PARCC content when building their own tests is an innovative approach that could allow more states to use high-quality, universally designed items.[80] And with approval by governing members, nonmembers may access Smarter Balanced materials for the same fee paid by consortium states.[81] Continuing and improving on these policies will ensure that more students have greater access to better exams.

States and districts should provide more guidance and information to schools, families, and other stakeholders on test accessibility and accommodations

Better tests are not effective without better information. States must create clarity for districts around state-approved accommodations, and although both PARCC and Smarter Balanced provide tools for educators to capture students' needs, schools and parents need more local information to better understand available supports.[82] Accordingly, states and districts should provide additional guidance to schools and families to ensure that students have consistent access to appropriate accommodations and are prepared to interact with suitable features when taking the exams. Embedding supports within students' daily instruction also will ensure that they are comfortable using them on test day.[83]

State and local leaders, assessment developers, and others must work together to continue to make progress on next-generation assessments for all students

Assessments are evolving, and leaders at all levels must continue to make exams better for the entire student population. An increased emphasis on universal design, accessibility, and functional interoperability can further reduce accommodations needed on future tests. PARCC and Smarter Balanced are a step in the right direction, but each system has challenges and barriers to full accessibility.

Going forward, assessments must adapt to keep up with evolving educational needs and should accommodate the best assistive technology available. Test takers, for example, need improved read-aloud features, test questions that are culturally responsive, and exams readily available in multiple languages. Cross-state efforts have been extremely productive to date, and states should continue to work across state lines to optimize next-generation exams for the greatest number of students.

Conclusion

Through the use of universal design principles and embedded support features, both the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium assessments offer advancements in accessibility for students with disabilities and English language learners. Not only are they more rigorous in academic content, but they also enable students to experience a tailored yet comparable testing experience to better demonstrate what they know and can do without unnecessary barriers.

The Every Student Succeeds Act reinforces the need for accessible exams for all students. ESSA maintains the annual assessment requirement in English language arts and mathematics in third through eighth grade and at least once in high school and holds states accountable for student achievement by subgroup to ensure that all students are making progress. The law also requires assessments to have appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners and to be developed using the principles of universal design for learning.[84]

PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams are a step forward in assessment, developed with UDL principles and embedded accessibility features and accommodations. As a result, students with disabilities and English language learners have an improved opportunity to be tested with their peers and to demonstrate their knowledge with fewer impediments to access. The next generation of assessments, with a heightened focused on universal design, accessibility, and functional interoperability, should build on this progress in an effort to guarantee the equitable assessment of all learners.

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Acknowledgments

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