

## GUIDELINES FOR CHOOSING TEXT-TO-SPEECH OR READ ALOUD ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SMARTER BALANCED ELA SUMMATIVE AND INTERIM ASSESSMENT READING PASSAGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN GRADES 3-5

November 15, 2019

The decision to provide a student in grades 3-5 with text-to-speech or human read aloud accommodations as identified in the student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) or 504 Plan for the English language arts (ELA) reading assessment passages is a significant decision, one that has possible long-term implications for the child. These accommodations are defined as follows:

**Text-to-speech:** Text is read aloud to the student via embedded text-to-speech technology. The student is able to control the speed as well as raise or lower the volume of the voice via a volume control.

**Read aloud:** Text is read aloud to the student via an external screen reader or by a trained and qualified human reader who follows the administration guidelines provided in the *Smarter Balanced Test Administration Manual* and *Read Aloud Guidelines*. All or portions of the content may be read aloud.

The decision about providing either of these accommodations should be guided by a set of questions to determine whether it is appropriate to provide the *Smarter Balanced* ELA reading passages via the embedded text-to-speech accommodation or the non-embedded human reader accommodation.

### BACKGROUND

In designing the Smarter Balanced assessments, states agreed on the claims that the assessments were to address.<sup>1</sup> The reading claim, Claim #1, is:

*Students can read closely and analytically to comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts.*

For students in grades 3-5, the Smarter Balanced ELA reading claim integrates the ability to read and the ability to understand what was read. Providing ELA reading passages via text-to-speech or a human reader to students who do not meet specific criteria<sup>2</sup> means that these combined skills are not being assessed, and no conclusions can be reached about the student's skills in these areas.

There is minimal research on the numbers of students with disabilities in grades 3-5 who might need text-to-speech or read aloud assistance because of a disability that interferes with their ability to learn to decode and comprehend text. Some states have suggested that from 1% to 1.5% of their total student population may have a disability that severely limits or prevents them from decoding written text, while others indicate that the numbers are much smaller or much larger. These students may be those who are blind or have significant visual impairments but have not learned to read braille, and those students who have disabilities that have significant decoding or fluency challenges.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The claims are identified in the content specifications for the *Smarter Balanced* ELA/literacy assessment. The content specifications document is available at [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The *Smarter Balanced* ELA reading assessment allows text-to-speech and read aloud for directions and ELA items as designated supports available to all students with documented needs. It also allows text-to-speech and read aloud for ELA reading passages for those students with IEPs that document the need for these accommodations for ELA reading passages (see the updated guidelines [here](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Your state should be keeping track of the number of students receiving the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for ELA reading passages. It will provide additional professional development and guidance if it appears that too many or too few students may be using the accommodation for the Smarter Balanced ELA reading assessment passages.

Because grades 3-5 are a critical time for students to learn to read and grow in their comprehension skills, it is important to obtain a good measure of these skills. Providing the text-to-speech and read aloud accommodations to students who do not need them because of their identified reading disability can have negative consequences for instruction and for their growing decoding and comprehension skills. For example, some educators might assume that students who receive the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation no longer need to be instructed on decoding and fluency skills, which is a clearly inappropriate assumption.

Only those students for whom it is appropriate to provide the Smarter Balanced ELA reading assessment passages through text-to-speech or read aloud accommodations should receive them. Further, for those students receiving the read aloud accommodation, it is critical that the reader adhere to the [Smarter Balanced Read Aloud Guidelines](#). The guidelines for Spanish speakers are available [here](#).

The questions provided here are ones that can assist IEP/504 decision-making teams in determining whether it is appropriate to indicate that students in grades 3-5 should be provided the reading passages for an ELA reading assessment via a text-to-speech or human read aloud accommodation. The questions should be answered by the student's teachers, and by the student himself or herself. Then, the IEP/504 team can consider both the provided answers, along with other diagnostic information to make a decision about the provision of text-to-speech or read aloud accommodations for the Smarter Balanced ELA reading assessment. A tool for documenting the responses to questions is provided in Table 1. Educators should also consult their local policies on the administration of this accommodation.

## QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

*1. Is this student blind or does this student have a significant visual impairment? If so, is the student learning to read braille?*

A student who is learning to read braille should be assessed in grades 3-5 with the braille form of the assessment, so that an accurate measure of his or her reading and comprehension skills is obtained. If the student has not learned to read braille, providing the Smarter Balanced ELA reading assessment passages through text-to-speech or read aloud is appropriate.

*2. Does the student have a reading-based disability? Does the disability affect the student's decoding skills, fluency skills, or comprehension skills?*

A reading-based disability may affect a student's ability to decode, read with fluency, understand text that is decoded, or a combination of these. Determining the nature of the student's reading challenges can help determine the appropriate intervention approaches, as well as needed accommodations during classroom instruction and during assessments. Having a reading-based disability means that there is strong evidence of the persistence of the disability despite intensive, targeted instruction. There should be documentation of the interventions used and formative assessment data on the effect of each intervention. Evidence of a reading-based disability should have been documented in grades K-2, and reflected in such challenges as difficulty learning letters or letter sounds, difficulty in learning sight words, and difficulty in phoneme blending. These and other data (for example, student work) should be reviewed by the IEP/504 team to consider the access effects of the use of the accommodation. The text-to-speech or read aloud accommodations are meant to provide access to the text, not to make up for being a slow reader. Being a slow reader does not mean that the student should receive the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for the *Smarter Balanced* ELA reading assessment in grades 3-5.

*3. Is the student an English learner (EL)?*

An English learner is a student who is learning how to read at the same time that he or she is learning English. It is important to obtain an accurate measure of his or her decoding and skills in English as the student learns the language, which may take several years. Thus, being an EL is not a sole reason to receive the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for the Smarter Balanced ELA reading passages. If the EL also has a reading-based disability (as defined in Question 2 above) or is blind, then the considerations for those disabilities would apply. Only students with an IEP or 504 accommodation plan are eligible to receive the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation. Students without an IEP or 504 plan could be eligible for the text-to-speech or read aloud designated support.

*4. Does the student have other needs that might be accommodated by the provision of the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation?*

In the past, some educators attempted to monitor the pace at which a student went through an assessment by providing the read aloud accommodation. Pacing involved adjusting how fast the administrator read an item, the punctuation used as he or she read, and how much time was provided between each item to allow the student to respond. This is not an appropriate reason to provide the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation because it masks what the assessment is assessing. Sometimes a student who is not blind or does not have a significant visual impairment, or does not have a reading-based disability, has a disability that may have produced a situation where the child ended up lagging in his or her reading skills. This should be addressed through instruction rather than the assessment. It is important that students with other learning needs not be provided the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for the ELA reading passages. IEP/504 teams should recognize that beginning readers struggle for a variety of reasons. Thus, the team must use student data on the effect of the accommodation during instruction to decide whether the child's struggles are due to the disability. By only offering the text-to-speech and read aloud accommodations to those students with true reading-based disabilities or blindness (for those who have not learned braille) and not providing to students with other learning needs, the system has documentation of the need to address the student's missing skills.

*5. Have interventions been used to improve the student's decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills? If so, what approaches have been used to strengthen the student's decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills across all content areas?*

Documentation of the approaches that have been taken to strengthen the student's decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills is an important step in determining whether a text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation is needed. This documentation should include specific dates with progress monitoring data and interventions implemented. It should demonstrate that continuous, intensive interventions have not been successful in improving student decoding, fluency, or comprehension performance. Only if this can be demonstrated, should the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation be considered for the student.

*6. Does the student use text-to-speech or receive a read aloud accommodation during instruction?*

Students with significant disability-related barriers to accessing text usually have demonstrated these barriers over an extended period of time. As a result, for instructional purposes, they have used the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation during instruction to gain access to text. They also may have membership in an organization such as Bookshare, or regularly use assistive technology software to provide them access to text. If the student has not been provided these types of accommodations during instruction, he or she should not be provided during the assessment.

7. Does the student use text-to-speech or receive a read aloud accommodation during formative assessments or during other Smarter Balanced summative or interim assessments?

Another indicator of the need for text-to-speech or read aloud for the Smarter Balanced ELA reading passages is that the student regularly receives the accommodation during formative assessments or other Smarter Balanced summative or interim assessments. If a student receives text-to-speech or read aloud for instruction but not for formative assessments or for other Smarter Balanced summative or interim assessments, it is likely that the student does not need text-to-speech or read aloud for the Smarter Balanced ELA reading passages.

8. Does someone (e.g., teacher, paraprofessional, another student, parent) regularly read aloud to the student in school?

A possible supporting indicator of the need for text-to-speech or the read aloud accommodation is that the student typically is read to instead of the student reading for himself or herself. This indicator should be used with caution. It should not just be considered because students with disabilities are typically provided the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation. Instead, the fact that someone else reads aloud to the student, rather than the student reading for himself or herself, is because it has been determined that the student will lack access to important information due to significant barriers to decoding, fluency, or comprehension. Even when this is the case, it does not necessarily mean that the student should receive the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for grade 3-5 ELA reading passages. There is a risk that some students who are regularly read aloud to in school may not have had appropriate access to high-quality reading instruction; this needs to be ruled out when using read aloud in school as a supporting indicator. Further, instruction should always strive to increase the student's independent reading.

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS IN GRADES 3-5

The student's teacher should set aside time to talk to the student about his or her reading skills and the need for the text-to-speech or human read aloud accommodation during the Smarter Balanced ELA reading assessment. During this discussion, it may be appropriate to use other terms to ensure that the student understands the questions. For example, if the student does not know the term "text-to-speech," perhaps refer to "screen readers" or "audio functions." In addition, none of these questions on their own indicates that it is appropriate to provide text-to-speech or read aloud to the student. Even when all of the student's answers to the questions indicate that the student prefers text-to-speech or read aloud, that information must be balanced by evidence that the student has received intensive, targeted reading instruction.

The following questions can be used during this discussion.

1. Do you read to yourself at school or when you are at home? If not, is it because you have trouble reading?

Students who are struggling readers generally do not want to read to themselves at school or at home, and avoid doing so. Students in grades 3-5 usually will say that they "can't read" if they have trouble reading. This in itself is not an indication that text-to-speech or read aloud is an appropriate accommodation for the child. It is important to pair this information with evidence that the student has received intensive, targeted reading instruction. If that is the case, then with evidence that the intensive targeted reading instruction has not produced increased decoding or fluency skills, a student response indicating that he or she does not read to himself or herself can contribute to a decision to provide text-to-speech or read aloud for grades 3-5 ELA reading passages.

2. *Is it harder or easier for you to understand a book if you read it yourself or if it is read to you through text-to-speech or by another person?*

Text-to-speech and read aloud accommodations require listening skills that students may not have gained if they do not regularly use the accommodation. Asking whether it is easier to read for themselves or to listen to someone read may provide an indication that text-to-speech or read aloud may be appropriate. Caution needs to be exercised here, however, because struggling readers may indicate a preference for text-to-speech or read aloud even though they do not understand better when the accommodation is provided (see section below on *Diagnostic Information to Collect*). A student response to this question indicating that the student thinks that it is easier to understand a book if it is read to him or her should be verified through the collection of diagnostic information.

3. *If you could choose, would you like to have tests read to you or would you prefer to read them yourself?*

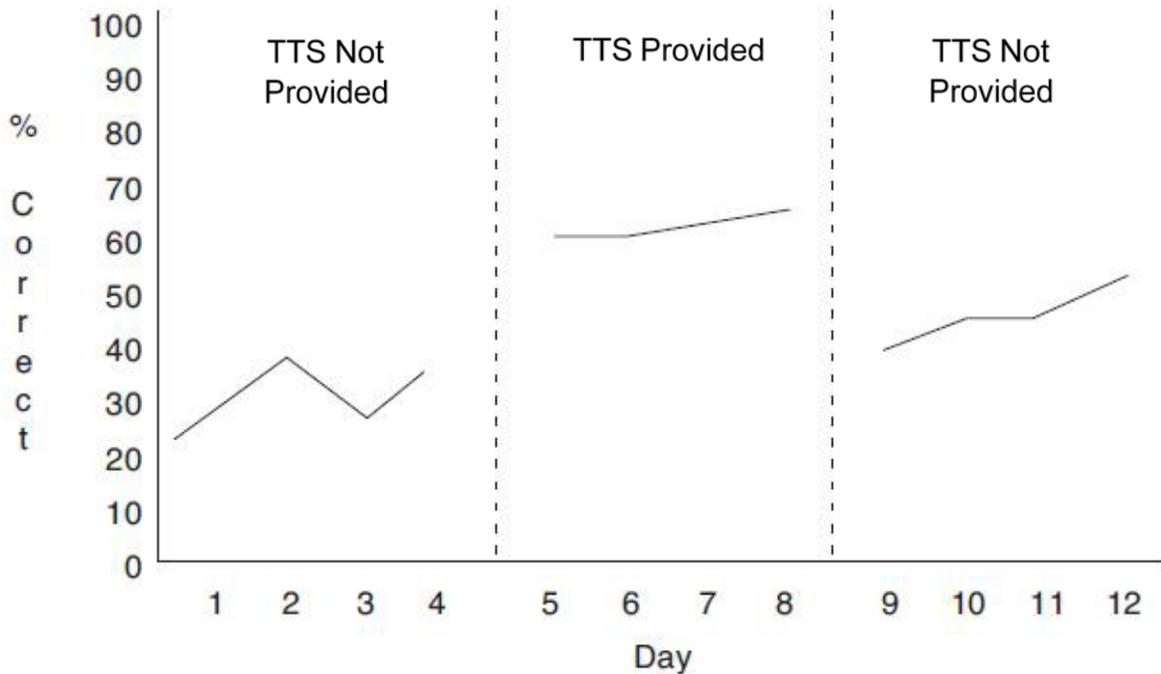
This simple question provides another indication of the student's preference. Like the other questions in this section, opting for having someone read to him or her does not necessarily mean it is appropriate to select text-to-speech or read aloud for the student. It is important to pair this information with evidence that the student has received intensive, targeted reading instruction, and that it has been unsuccessful in improving the decoding or fluency skills of the student.

#### **DIAGNOSTIC INFORMATION TO COLLECT**

The questions indicate several types of data that should be collected and documented about the student in grades 3-5 who is being considered for the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation. This information should be documented so that it can contribute to the decision about whether the student in grades 3-5 should receive one of these accommodations. Document the following:

- Nature and duration of targeted interventions provided to the student to improve decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills
- Evidence of improvement or non-improvement following each targeted intervention
- Student performance with and without either text-to-speech or read aloud

One way to document student performance with and without the accommodation being considered is to have the student respond to a simple reading achievement test or to Smarter Balanced practice items with and without the accommodation. Graphing performance will help identify patterns (as in the figure below). The testing dates and student performance under each condition should be documented.



Note: This figure was adapted with permission from one in J.L. Elliott and M.L. Thurlow (2006), *Improving test performance of students with disabilities on district and state assessments* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Even with performance data that indicate improved performance with the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation, it is important to differentiate whether the improvement is due to the effect of the student’s disability or simply to poor reading skills not related to a disability. This differentiation can be informed by the responses to the other items included here.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Because the decision to provide a student in grades 3-5 with the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation for the ELA reading assessment passages is a significant decision, with possible long-term implications for the child, the decision must be made with extreme care. The questions included here should be used to help inform that decision. Only when a preponderance of the information obtained from responses to the questions reflect a need for either text-to-speech or read aloud, should the accommodation be provided.

**Table 1.** Documentation of Possible Need for Text-to-Speech or Read Aloud Accommodations for ELA Reading Passages for Students with Disabilities in Grades 3-5

<p><b>Student Name:</b></p>			
<p><b>Teacher:</b></p> <p>Responses in <i>shaded boxes may</i> indicate a need for the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation. A <i>preponderance of evidence</i> should exist rather than one or two marks in shaded boxes for the accommodation to be provided to a student in grades 3-5 for ELA reading passages.</p>			
Question <sup>4</sup>	Yes	No	Comments
Is this student blind or does this student have a significant visual impairment?			
If the student is blind or has a significant visual impairment, is the student learning to read braille?			
Does this student have an identified reading-based disability that affects the student's decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills?			
Have interventions been used to improve the student's decoding, fluency, or comprehension skills?			
Does the student use text-to-speech or receive a read aloud accommodation during instruction?			Describe skills affected.
Does the student belong to Bookshare or a similar organization?			Describe approaches.
Does the student regularly use assistive technology software or audio books?			
Does the student use text-to-speech or receive a read aloud accommodation during formative assessments or during other <i>Smarter Balanced</i> tests?			
Does someone (teacher, paraprofessional, another student, parent) regularly read aloud to the student in school?			
<p><b>Student Input:</b></p>			
Did the student indicate he or she reads to himself or herself at school or at home, and that it is because he or she has trouble reading?			
Does the student indicate that it is <b>easier</b> to understand a book when it is read to him or her through text-to-speech or by another person?			
Does the student indicate that given the choice, he or she would prefer to read tests himself or herself?			

<sup>4</sup> Some questions in the “questions” sections are not included in this table because they are not indicators of a possible need for the text-to-speech or read aloud accommodation. These include, for example, the question “Is the student an English learner (EL)?”

