



Deborah Sigman
Executive Committee Co-
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California

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February 25, 2015

Dear Advocates and Partners,

Thank you for the opportunity to continue discussions regarding accessibility on the Smarter Balanced assessments. Your guidance and our commitment to include students of diverse backgrounds—including students with disabilities and English language learners—in the assessment process has allowed us to generate several means by which we can address points included in your letter dated January 23, 2015.

1. Text-to-Speech for Grades Three to Five, ELA Reading Passages

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) is committed to an evidence-based decision making process in each component of its system, particularly in the area of accessibility. Therefore, as we continued discussions with you, we also reached out to experts in the research community. Given information we received and your explanations of the benefits of allowing read aloud on English Language Arts (ELA) reading passages in grades 3 to 5 for some students with disabilities, we created a plan for possible implementation of this change in the Smarter Balanced read aloud policy:

- 1.1. Propose action to Executive Committee by February 19, 2015. The proposal would call for allowing read aloud on grades 3 to 5 ELA reading passages as a non-embedded accommodation for spring 2015 test administration.
- 1.2. Send proposed action to Member States by February 24, 2015.
- 1.3. Hold a webinar with Member States by February 24, 2015.
- 1.4. Ask for a vote by Member States by March 13, 2015.

2. Failure to Provide Other Essential Accommodations

The January 23, 2015, letter includes questions about several accessibility resources in this section. Smarter Balanced has addressed each accessibility resource topic as follows:

- 2.1. Smarter Balanced has included, and will continue to include, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and other advocacy groups in the process related to accessibility resources as requested.
 - 2.2. According to current policy, beginning in grade 6, calculators may be available when computation is not being measured. Calculators are not available in grades 3 to 5. However, a single digit multiplication table is made available as a non-embedded accommodation beginning in grade 4. We can include our mathematics content experts, Dr. Shelbi Cole and Judy Hickman, in future discussions regarding the use of calculators should any additional questions arise.
 - 2.3. Smarter Balanced is researching the issue of the use of American Sign Language (ASL) as an accommodation for reading passages again with experts. We completed initial research on this topic on February 23, 2015. Upon approval by consortium members, this accommodation could be available for the test administration during the 2015-2016 school year.
 - 2.4. The use of a scribe is already available on the mathematics and ELA sections of the test as either a designated support or accommodation.
 - 2.5. The use of word prediction as a designated support or accommodation is already under discussion with content and assistive technology (AT) experts. Smarter Balanced next step is to present to the Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines Committee on March 5, 2015, and schedule a follow-up meeting between AT programmers and developers working on the test administration platform with deep knowledge of AT. Upon approval by consortium members, this designated support or accommodation could be available for the test administration during the 2015-2016 school year.
 - 2.6. Smarter Balanced needs more information regarding the proposed functionality of graphic organizers as a designated support or accommodation. Smarter Balanced would like to collaborate with NFB regarding the use of graphic organizers. Our next step is to identify the contact information of those at Smarter Balanced and NFB who would research this issue.
 - 2.7. Background research with computer programmers indicates that text-to-speech for proof reading may be feasible. Our next step is to consult with experts from various fields of study (e.g., AT, measurement, mathematics content, ELA content, disabilities, and English language acquisition). Smarter Balanced engaged experts the week of February 16, 2015, to begin discussions about the viability of this designated support or accommodation. Upon approval by consortium members, this designated support or accommodation could be available for the test administration during the 2015-2016 school year.
3. Accessibility Barriers on the American Institutes for Research (AIR) Platform

AIR has a long-standing relationship with NFB. Most recently, AIR hired Ann Taylor as a

consultant through NFB. She provided AIR with information that could improve the testing experience of students using AT.

- 3.1. Based on the advice of Ms. Taylor, AIR has completed the critical enhancements and AIR plans to deploy these soon. AIR will provide under a separate communication the specific list of completed enhancements.
- 3.2. Smarter Balanced will continue to work with experts from the University of Colorado (Denver) and ATI to standardize the language around ATI functionality so that we can make common functions more transparent to ATI developers.

4. Incompatibility with Commonly Used Screen-Access Software Programs and Devices

Smarter Balanced wants to ensure that documentation about our accessibility compatibility infrastructure is available to our states and other stakeholders. We also strive to work formally with experts in this area.

- 4.1. The Test Delivery system does not block any of the common screen readers. Our documentation is imprecise in this regard and will be updated to describe this flexibility.
- 4.2. Our desktop secure browser is built on top of the open source Firefox browser. This allows our browser to interact well with a wide variety of available AT. Specifically, with respect to screen readers, our platform is accessible to Non-Visual Desktop Access (NVDA), windows eyes, voice over, narrator, etc. However, as NFB is aware, not all screen readers offer the same level of experience. Taking into consideration the level of support for Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA), support for refreshable Braille displays and technology use at schools, JAWS for Windows ® is the screen reader recommended for taking the assessments. We are constantly testing the others and have every intention to add to our recommended list once they meet all our ARIA/refreshable Braille needs.
- 4.3. Regarding Braille embossers, we propose to advance the field by promoting an existing data format as an open specification.
 - 4.3.1. We have drafted a Request for Information (RFI) as of February 15, 2015, that would solicit an interested partner to release their data format as an open specification.
 - 4.3.2. Smarter Balanced would like NFB's comments on the RFI by February 27, 2015.
 - 4.3.3. The RFI will be presented to UCLA procurement by March 6, 2015.
 - 4.3.4. Upon receipt of responses, Smarter Balanced will evaluate the effort required to edit every item so that it utilizes the proposed open specification.
 - 4.3.5. Smarter Balanced is prepared to work with key knowledgeable developers at Window Eyes and Apple to help them better integrate their products with our test delivery application.



5. Requirement that Schools Emboss Tactile Graphics with a Tiger Embosser

The current refreshable Braille embosser and software used on Smarter Balanced assessments has been used by several states for a number of years. However, Smarter Balanced recognizes that it is important to search for other products that can expand access to more students. To this end, Smarter Balanced plans are as follows:

- 5.1. A solution for spring 2015 is to provide states with three comparable options to make available to students: a paper fixed form, an online fixed form, and an online adaptive form. For the online fixed form, hard copies of graphics, item by item, could be made available in advance for students taking the online form.
- 5.2. A long-term solution that emphasizes an open specification for the data format so that multiple devices will render embossable graphics well.

As a state led organization, these plans will be vetted with our executive committee and governing members. We will keep you apprised of our progress in deriving a resolution on these important issues. Thank you again for your willingness to work with Smarter Balanced to create a maximally accessible and valid assessment. We look forward to working with you now and in the future toward this end. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the commitments set forth in this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Tony Alpert
Executive Director
Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium