



# Better Tests, Fewer Barriers

Advances in Accessibility through PARCC and Smarter Balanced

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# Introduction and summary

English language learners and students with disabilities make up more than 20 percent of public school enrollment.<sup>1</sup> In the 2012-13 school year, an estimated 4.4 million public school students were identified as English language learners.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> And in 1997, IDEA required that states include students with disabilities in statewide and districtwide assessments, with individual accommodations as needed.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> With

these requirements came increased testing accommodation policies to ensure that students with disabilities and English language learners fully participated under fair testing conditions.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.

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