NAEP Provides Vehicle for Study of Read-Aloud Option

Testing supports are subject of debate

By Christina A. Samuels

Having teachers read aloud a reading-comprehension test to students with disabilities and English-language learners offers a boost in scores without altering what the test is trying to measure, according to a study of about 2,000 California 4th and 8th graders who were given the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, in 2013. The most significant difference was seen among 4th graders with specific learning disabilities who had the entire test read aloud to them: Their scores were an average of 5.8 points higher than those of students in that disability category who did not get any accommodation. The highest potential score on the test was 33.

But at the 8th grade level, the score differences were smaller and more mixed. In that grade, the largest difference was seen among students with disabilities who had everything on the reading test read aloud except for text passages. Their scores were an average of 1.9 points higher than those of students with disabilities who received no accommodation.

Weighing an Accommodations' Impact

Researchers included more than 2,000 California 4th and 8th graders in a study of the effectiveness of read-aloud accommodations on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. The students—English-language learners; students with disabilities, and students in neither subgroup—either were allowed to have the entire reading test read aloud to them, to have everything but the reading passages read aloud, or to have no read-aloud accommodation.

Researchers found that:

- **All** 4th-grade reading scores improved when the entire test was read aloud to the students. However, ELLs and students with disabilities saw a greater level of increase.
• Fourth graders with specific learning disabilities saw the greatest improvement in their scores, with an average **5.8 point increase** when the entire test was read aloud compared to no read-aloud accommodation.

• Eighth graders generally showed some benefit from having the reading test read aloud to them, but the results were **not as strong** as for 4th graders.

• The strongest results for 8th graders were for students with disabilities who had everything but reading passages read to them. They showed a **1.9 point increase** in scores compared to students who did not have the read-aloud accommodation.

• For 8th graders with disabilities, having the entire test, including passages, read aloud produced score increases that were not **statistically significant**.

SOURCE: University of California, Davis

Native English-speakers without disabilities also saw their scores go up when they were given a read-aloud accommodation. But English-learners and students with disabilities saw their scores rise more, an indication of a "differential boost" that still allows the accommodation to be valid, said Jamal Abedi, a professor of education at the University of California, Davis. He is the lead author of the research report, which was commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers NAEP. "In general, we make a distinction between features that make a system more accessible, and features that alter the construct," he said. "When [read-aloud] improves assessment for all, that is an accessibility feature."

**Common-Core Implications**

The findings, presented at a Feb. 28 committee meeting of the group that oversees policy for NAEP, do not foretell any upcoming changes to the test, often known as "the nation's report card." Read-aloud accommodations are not currently allowed on NAEP, and no changes to that policy are imminent.

But the results add to the research surrounding read-aloud accommodations, a topic of controversy that the two testing groups that are creating general assessments based on the Common Core State Standards have recently grappled with.

Mr. Abedi, who also serves as an adviser on English-learners to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of the two groups, said the findings suggest that read-aloud accommodations on reading-comprehension tests could be useful for students with disabilities and for English-language learners, and feasible to implement.

"We don't see any harm with this, and we don't see any validity concerns," Mr. Abedi said in an interview. Mr. Abedi noted, however, that the findings were limited to examining the use of read-aloud accommodations for reading-comprehension tests, not for language arts tests that measure other skills.

Currently, read-aloud accommodations are not allowed on NAEP, which is given to a sample of U.S. students every two years.

Unlike other large-scale tests, NAEP does not assign scores to individual students. Instead, the test uses its representative sample of students to derive its results. It's also
not a test that students are required to take, which afforded some latitude to researchers on offering a given accommodation.

**Key Student Groups**
The study was conducted on 1,061 4th graders and 1,083 8th graders in California, which has a large enough sample of English-language learners and students with disabilities to analyze. The sample also allowed students with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, to be studied separately from students with other types of disabilities. Students were divided into three groups. One group had no part of the reading-comprehension test read aloud to them. The second group was allowed to have the entire reading test read aloud, including text passages, questions, and responses. The third group had all parts of the test read aloud except the text passages.

All 4th graders, including those without disabilities, saw a boost in their scores when the entire reading-comprehension test was read aloud to them. A similar effect was seen when every part of the test except the reading passages was read aloud.

For 8th graders, the score boosts for some groups of student were not statistically significant. For example, students with learning disabilities who had the entire reading test read aloud showed an improvement of less than a point over students who did not have that accommodation.

The findings were presented to the assessment-development committee of the National Assessment Governing Board, an independent body that sets policy for NAEP. Cary Sneider, the vice chairman of the committee and an associate professor of research methodology at Portland State University in Oregon, said the committee favors read-aloud accommodations on other portions of the test, such as in math. But reading aloud the reading test shifts it to a listening test, he said.

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"The test is on the ability to read written language," he said. The Smarter Balanced consortium has said that reading aloud reading passages will not be allowed for English/language arts tests in grades 3-5, but will be permitted in middle and high school, because the tests for older students are considered to be measuring more than just the ability to independently access text.

PARCC will allow a read-aloud accommodation of text passages on its English/language arts tests. A notation will be made on a student's results indicating that the accommodation was used, and that no claims can be made about the student's ability to demonstrate foundational print skills, such as decoding and fluency.

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