

RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

Exploring Educator Perspectives on Potential Accessibility Gaps in the Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment

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KEY POINTS

- » Accessibility for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities is built into the design of the Dynamic Learning Maps® (DLM®) alternate assessment.
- » Most educators (85–94%) responding to the 2019 test administrator survey agreed that their student was able to respond to items regardless of their disability, behavior, or health concerns; their student had access to all necessary supports in order to participate in the assessment; and their student was able to effectively use available accessibility supports.
- » We convened focus groups to explore the perceptions of the small percentage of educators who indicated that DLM assessments are not fully accessible to all students with significant cognitive disabilities.
- » During the focus groups, educators discussed some uncertainty with assessment administration, assessment materials, and accessibility supports in the system.
- » Most challenges that educators described are addressed in existing documentation.
- » While this study did not identify accessibility gaps in the DLM system, we did learn valuable information.
- » We are planning better ways to communicate critical accessibility information to educators.

ACCESSIBILITY BY DESIGN

DLM assessments are designed to be accessible to students with significant cognitive disabilities through test design features and administration options.

Students may use a variety of accessibility supports during assessment administration. There are supports provided in the DLM System (e.g., magnification), supports requiring additional tools or materials (e.g., switch use), and supports provided outside the system (e.g., human read aloud). There are also allowable practices test administrators may use to support students, such as substituting manipulatives.

Test design also promotes accessibility. Testlets for each academic content standard are available at multiple levels of complexity, called linkage levels, to provide all students access to rigorous grade-level academic content. Assessments are delivered as short testlets in either computer-delivered or teacher-administered formats.

STUDY DESIGN

The 2019 test administrator survey asked educators the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that their student was able to respond to items regardless of their disability, behavior, or health concerns; their student had access to all necessary supports to participate in the assessment; and their student was able to effectively use available accessibility supports.

While the vast majority of educators agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, results revealed that a small percentage of educators disagreed (ranging from approximately 6% to 15% of more than 50,000 responses). We conducted a study to explore these findings.

We contacted educators who disagreed with at least one accessibility question on the 2019 survey for one or more of their students. We invited educators who indicated a mix of positive and less positive student experiences with the DLM assessment to increase the likelihood of constructive feedback and prioritized educators from a broad representation of states. Of the 182 educators contacted, 83 reported interest in focus group participation. We conducted six focus group sessions between March and April 2020 with a range of one to five participants in each. A total of 18 educators from 11 states participated in the virtual focus groups.

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EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES

Educators provided valuable insight into the reasons they disagreed with survey questions about accessibility of DLM assessments. Focus group participants discussed perceived strengths of the system as well as areas they found challenging.

"When I look at what we were using before...DLM...this is 100% better...there's a lot of positives...about DLM."

Many of the challenges they described are areas that are documented in existing test administrator materials.

Assessment Administration

Several educators voiced uncertainty about assessment administration. Responses indicated some general uncertainty about appropriate administration procedures as well as more specific questions.

"I feel like I didn't know what I was doing when I was giving the tests."

Some educators were uncertain what to do when students have trouble attending to the assessment. Other educators also indicated uncertainty surrounding specific allowable practices.

"...People get confused about...is it okay if we use pencils? They're so scared that they're going to do something incorrect...We need some clarity about what they can use and what they can't."

🔍 The *Accessibility Manual* describes allowable practices, including options for flexible administration and administering when students are alert and engaged. This topic is also addressed in required training for new and returning test administrators.

Assessment Materials

Some educators were unsure about options for substituting assessment materials and some expressed difficulty with finding materials.

"...Sometimes I feel like I'm just scrambling to find some random object. So, I don't know if there's any way of having more of a bank of objects that we're constantly pulling from."

"...Some of the things we don't even have in our classroom...A wet sponge and a dry sponge and a plastic bag and a cloth bag. These are things that we don't generally use for instruction or have available."

🔍 Test administrator materials include lists of manipulatives that might be used in DLM assessments for that grade. Educators can create their own collections of objects before they start testing. Guidance also describes that test administrators can substitute materials as needed, for instance if a specific object is not available or if a student is more familiar with other materials.

Some educators had difficulty handling multiple objects with students using eye gaze to respond.

"Sometimes when the children are asked to make a choice between three or four things and I'm trying to hold up three or four things...It becomes quite a lot to handle with the students."

🔍 The *Accessibility Manual* suggests holding pairs of objects at a time to further support students using eye gaze to respond.

Accessibility Supports in the System

Some educators described challenges their students experienced with accessibility supports in the system. For instance, some educators described that enabling magnification introduced scrolling, which was challenging for some students.

"When I had to scroll down to see the answers, I had to scroll back up to read the paragraph again and then scroll back down. It makes them lose focus really fast."

🔍 The *Accessibility Manual* cautions that scrolling may be required if magnification is used, and that other devices (such as a larger monitor or projector) can be used if students have difficulty with scrolling on a small device.

A few educators also mentioned that the computer read aloud was too slow, causing student disengagement or frustration.

"The read aloud...I know I had students that used that feature but then if it went too slow, they didn't really attend very well to that task at hand."

🔍 The *Accessibility Manual* includes guidance that educators may read the text out loud to their students.

Accessibility of Test Content

Other educator comments revealed possible disconnects between instruction and the content measured by the DLM assessment. For instance, some educators found even the lowest levels of content too challenging for their students.

"Even with Initial...[linkage]...level, sometimes it's not low enough for some of those kids with significant disabilities."

🔍 DLM professional development modules describe approaches to instruction aligned with content at the lowest levels that are intentionally designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities so that all students can access rigorous grade-level academic material. These modules currently have low use rates; we are discussing methods, along with the DLM Governance Board, for improving use of the modules to support educators in providing all students access to the content measured by DLM assessments.

When asked if they had accessed the *Accessibility Manual*, educators had mixed responses. Some had not accessed the manual and others described the manual as being too lengthy and cumbersome to use. While the study did not identify accessibility gaps for DLM assessments, it provided important information about ways to better support educators in administering assessments and providing aligned instruction to students with significant cognitive disabilities. We are using this feedback, in collaboration with the DLM Governance Board, to design condensed materials about test administration and allowable practices that succinctly describe how to approach the challenges and uncertainties revealed in this study.