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>
> Debra Meyne,
> Special Education
> Consultant
> Central Community
> School District, IA

Central Community School District Teachers

Iowa educators from the Central Community School District are determined to learn how to best support their students' reading goals. They know that students with reading deficits will fall behind in their general education classrooms if they cannot effectively access grade-level curriculum.

It's why the district is trialing uPAR, the online tool for assessing the effectiveness of reading accommodations with individual learners. "Now we actually have the data to say this is how our students learn best," reports Terri Selzer, Director of Student Services for Central Community. "That's what I love about uPAR."

Debra Meyne shares Selzer's enthusiasm. Meyne is a special education consultant working to build the capacity of the district to provide appropriate accommodations to students. She's excited to have a tool that solves a central challenge for educators, "We don't want IEP teams hastily checking off accommodations from a list of options. And we don't want accommodations copied and pasted from one year to the next. uPAR enables us to make some very informed decisions about what kids need versus what we think might benefit them."

uPAR stands for Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading. It is not a reading assessment; instead it determines which supports a student needs to best comprehend text. Students read a series of leveled text passages which are each presented in a different way: as text on the screen, as text on the screen read by a recorded adult voice, and as text highlighted in sync with a computer voice. Quizzes after each passage measure a student's comprehension with the adult reader and computer voice. These measures are compared with each student's independent reading level.

The results can be life changing.

One DeWitt 4th grader, for example, was assessed with uPAR in October. Without accommodations, Alyvia reads independently at a 1st grade level. uPAR demonstrated, however, that Alyvia could comprehend 4th grade reading passages with read-aloud accommodations on the computer.

Armed with this data, Alyvia's special educator, KateLynn Beck, shifted her teaching approach. "Before uPAR, I was focused on phonics instruction because she was so far behind. But once I saw the data and the tools available to help her, I made sure our tasks were more challenging and always at grade level. Now all three of my fourth graders are using text readers with grade-level stories and each week they show near 100 % comprehension!"

Cindy Cavanagh is the AT Specialist who first introduced uPAR to the Central Community District. She's delighted by how teachers like KateLynn Beck are using uPAR data and how smoothly many students, even in the early grades, have learned to use text readers. "The third graders are just rocking it!" she exudes. "I want videos of them. They're a part of the regular work of the classroom now, truly accessing instructional materials without relying on another adult."

Indeed, data from Central Community Schools supports a significant district-wide shift with reading accommodations this school year. In October, nearly all students with a documented reading goal (76 in total) had IEPs requiring an "oral adult reader," while just 10 required accessible instructional materials (AIM) and a text reader. After uPAR was administered, however, and IEPs were refreshed, the number of students requiring AIM shifted to 43.

"The schools are truly making use of the uPAR data," Cavanagh emphasizes. "They use it in IEP meetings with general ed. teachers and parents; they use it to support accommodations and for finding when accommodations are not helpful. They use it not to say every kid needs accessible materials [and a text reader], but where the data supports it, to move students toward greater independence." (NOTE: Most IEPs list both an adult reader and accessible materials for flexibility and transition purposes.)

This shift is possible, district leaders acknowledge, in part because uPAR results are so easy to understand. uPAR data is color coded like a stop light: in red, yellow and green. Teachers, parents, and even young students can quickly identify the grade levels they scored with each accommodation. "Initially parents may not support the idea of a reading accommodation for their child," reflects Director of Student Services Terri Selzer. "So having that uPAR data has helped a lot. We explain that, yes, we are still doing direct instruction to help improve reading, however, in some of those classes the reading material is harder than what your student can comprehend independently. And when they see this data, and what their child is capable of understanding, they approve. Parents *want* their children accessing grade-level material."

It's helpful, too, that uPAR results roll out to the administrator's monitor immediately after students complete the uPAR passages. Cavanagh is impressed with how some educators make use of this feature directly with students. "As the kids finish up, they just pull them aside, smooth and seamless, and show them how they did. Students immediately understand why they took the test. You can see that it builds ownership of the process—showing the students where they can go with accommodations."

Debra Meyne recently used this uPAR feature creatively for a different but powerful purpose with a high school senior. This senior had spent much of his education in self-contained classes (for behavioral challenges), and initially he was reluctant to take uPAR because he thought it was just another reading test to show how far below grade level he performs. His results, however, told a different story.
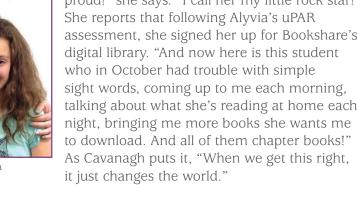
"It was great to be able to say, 'Check this out! Look at this!' Because while his independent reading level was low, his comprehension with both an adult reader and a text reader were at 12th grade. I showed him immediately after he was done as part of a big long conversation. He was afraid of graduating; he didn't think he had the skills and didn't know what he wanted to do next. But I told him, 'Look, you have some really good skills!' uPAR is such a visual thing that kids can see and understand. What he was capable of was right there in front of him."

The district's shift with accommodations is likely to mean more students will be proficient with text readers before they arrive in high school, and more will be aware of what they are capable of knowing and learning. That's encouraging news to Central Community High School teachers, notes Meyne. "Students with reading disabilities who enter high school already independent with their accommodations have a significant advantage."

KateLynn Beck with Alyvia

Meanwhile back in 4th grade, KateLynn Beck is already watching Alyvia bloom. "She's so proud!" she says. "I call her my little rock star!" She reports that following Alyvia's uPAR assessment, she signed her up for Bookshare's digital library. "And now here is this student who in October had trouble with simple sight words, coming up to me each morning, talking about what she's reading at home each night, bringing me more books she wants me to download. And all of them chapter books!" As Cavanagh puts it, "When we get this right, it just changes the world."

About the Author:
Eliza Anderson is passionate about assistive technology and writing respectfully to and for the disability community, with over 20 years experience writing for non-profit/human services. She currently focuses on creating and writing for program newsletters that promote assistive technology for individuals with disabilities.

Our Vision

Empower Students with Accessible Technologies that Address Unique Literacy Needs

It's commonplace in schools to see stacks of textbooks, paper notebooks, pencils and pens. These are the "conventional" learning tools in schools, and they are effective for many students. But for students with physical, cognitive or learning differences, these tools pose significant barriers to learning. These students require **specialized accessible technology** and media to maximize their learning. This is where Don Johnston excels. Since 1980 we have been developing and supplying innovative technologies to schools who recognize that each student has unique learning needs and can thrive in the right environment.

We strive to create the right environment. This requires the right tools, the right implementation and the right instructional approaches. We are committed to providing you with the most value from product selection to ongoing support and implementation.