

Statement on Communication Partner-Supported Testing Dr. Jen Leon

Thanks to the hard work of many self-advocates, parents, and professional advocates, doors are really starting to open in education for nonspeakers. A growing number of Spellers are now attending college and many others are expressing college aspirations. This is exciting and long overdue, but it is important that we avoid rushing into new territory ill-prepared. We must lead responsibly and thoughtfully in order to KEEP these doors open. It can be easy to hyperfocus on *academic* readiness and lose sight of the importance of *body* and *communication* readiness. All are important and all are required for success in college.

Partner-supported communication should always utilize best practices to ensure students are given full agency in their responses, and when it comes to academics, additional protocols and standards are required. Here, I discuss the issue of communication partner-supported testing. Though this might not always be the case, it is important to prepare as if all tests will be proctored, that is, a person appointed by the academic institution is watching and potentially scrutinizing everything that happens during the test. Whereas typical high schoolers get plenty of practice with this, most Spellers and communication partners do not. Furthermore, without clearly defined standards they may not know *how* to prepare and determine readiness for testing under these conditions.

The standards I've outlined below are based on my perspective as an experienced educator who has written, administered and proctored many exams, as well as what I have learned as a practitioner who has served as a communication partner for a number of students now, during college coursework, proctored exams, and standardized tests. They also represent my professional criteria for being willing to engage as a communication partner in this capacity, not just for my own professional integrity, but because there are significant implications for the larger community if best practices and standards are not upheld. Again, we want those doors *stay open*.

Standards and Criteria for Communication Partner-Supported Testing

1. **Communication Partner Qualifications:** The communication partner should either be a trained practitioner themselves or have been sufficiently coached by a trained practitioner. Additionally, it is crucial that the communication partner is not someone who is prone to test anxiety. Ideally, communication partners for testing should not be parents or family members. Know that some institutions may not allow this.
2. **Practice and Relationship:** The communication partner and student should invest ample time together building fluency and a trusted relationship working together IN THE AREA relevant to the test. For anyone requesting my communication partner services for testing, please note that before agreeing, a minimum of 3, in-person sessions are required to assess readiness. At that point, I will determine whether it is a good fit and make recommendations for any additional practice needed.
3. **Regulation:** A student must have effective regulation strategies that can be implemented with minimal disruption to the testing process. Testing can create additional stress leading to dysregulation, so practicing under these conditions with a simulated, non-parent proctor is strongly advised. Know that frequent, extreme, or injurious dysregulation may result in termination of testing.
4. **Spelling:** The student must be spelling with an utmost degree of cleanness. The communication partner must use best practices impeccably. Spelling criteria are as follow:

OPEN. The student must be communicating openly and fluently with no prompting from the communication partner except, perhaps, to help them get their body ready before dropping the board. Every poke will be called out/recorded during testing so the student must be able to self-correct. For math testing, "math openness" requires fluency in the math-specific spelling protocols I teach. Spelling math this way would be universally understood by math teachers.

FORM. There must be absolutely no movement of the board during active spelling. To practice, record during spelling, then watch it in fast-forward and watch the board for movement.

ACCURACY. Pokes must be clear and accurate enough that an onlooker could follow along during silent spelling. This can be practiced as well. Avoid skipping, gliding, double poking, etc.

EFFICIENCY. The students must be able to spell continuously, averaging at least 5-6 wpm. Take some baseline data and start working toward this goal if you're not there yet.

STAMINA. The student must be able to spell according to the above criteria for 2-3 hours at a time with only occasional, short (10 min or so) breaks and generally remain regulated throughout.

These are high, but necessary standards. Keep in mind, no one runs a marathon overnight and without overcoming setbacks. It takes time and hard work but focus on incremental improvements. Most of all, enjoy the process of learning and growth along the way!