
ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Accommodations are a variety of techniques and supports that are intended to provide a student with disabilities full access to the general curriculum. Appropriate accommodations include changes in instructional activities or testing procedures or materials that minimize or eliminate a disability-related barrier without creating favor for students with disabilities.

Despite recent changes in law and regulation supporting students with disabilities, educators face significant challenge in determining whether a student needs accommodations and in selecting specific accommodations that are linked to a student's functional limitations, given his or her disability.

Rationale and Mandates for Accommodations

To ensure that students with disabilities have access to appropriate educational programs, federal and state policies now require schools to provide accommodations. Prior to the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 97), however, many states and districts tended to exclude students with disabilities from statewide assessments, which effectively limited efforts to provide access to general education instruction. With IDEA 97 came new requirements that students with disabilities participate in statewide assessments. This mandate was coupled with the requirement that districts provide appropriate accommodations to students with disabilities to allow access to the regular education curriculum as well as to statewide assessments.

Since 1997, educators have struggled to develop accommodation policies that are perceived as fair and do not create advantages for students with disabilities. Considerable variability exists among states with regard to definition, types of accommodations allowed, and how, when, and whether to allow accommodations for students in state assessments. It is not uncommon to find that an accommodation that is allowed in one state is banned in another. Although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 attempts to bring greater accountability nationwide by mandating the inclusion of *all* students in state assessments, variability in the nature of student participation continues.

Although the research base is growing, empirically sound best practices in linking specific accommodations to individual student needs have not been forthcoming. The challenge for educators rests in providing accommodations to level the playing field for students with disabilities, without creating an unfair advantage for these students over their non-disabled peers.

Connecting Accommodations to Learning Needs

Characteristics of Accommodations

Most states typically group accommodations into four categories:

- Presentation (e.g., repeat directions, read aloud, use of modified answer sheet)
- Response (e.g., mark answers in book, use reference aids, point)
- Setting (e.g., study carrel, special lighting, separate room)
- Timing/scheduling (e.g., extended time, frequent breaks)

Accommodations are considered reasonable and appropriate to the extent to which they remove disability related barriers to ensure that students with disabilities are afforded the same access to learning and demonstrating knowledge and skills as a non-disabled peer.

Determining Need for Accommodations

Providing reasonable and appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities requires careful planning, assessment of the students' strengths, weaknesses and skills, and a consideration of resources. It involves a cooperative effort between those who know the student best (i.e., all the educators involved with the student and the parent) and the student, if appropriate. Determining need for instructional accommodations typically occurs within the framework of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting; however, in some states, this assessment may occur in other contexts as well.

Data-based decision making. Although often common practice, the student's category of disability or placement should not open up a menu from which team members can choose what would help the student. As much as possible, data-based decision making should be used in determining whether accommodations are needed, thereby reducing the likelihood that student's access to the general curriculum is not in fact *more limited* owing to overzealous team members providing as much as is available rather than providing only what is truly needed.

In fact, research indicates that students with disabilities are more often over-accommodated. Team members must be diligent when answering questions in order to determine whether and how to provide an individual student with accommodations. The following questions may be helpful:

- What types of accommodations are allowed in state and district policies? (Consider provisions for both instructional and testing accommodations.)
- Does the student display disability-related behaviors that interfere with learning and his or her ability to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skill?
- How can student strengths be utilized in planning for appropriate accommodations?
- Are classroom data available that support the use of specific accommodations for the student (i.e., have classroom teachers evaluated whether accommodations remove barriers for the student)?

Determining the most appropriate accommodations. Once it is established that a student requires accommodations, the team is challenged with the task of determining *which* accommodations may be most appropriate for the student. Current state accommodation policies vary greatly in the extent to which they link a student's functional limitations to the specific accommodations that are needed.

Strategies for Accommodations

Here we will provide an overview of possible instructional accommodations that might be considered

by IEP teams if appropriate to student needs. This is neither a checklist nor a list of appropriate accommodations for any individual.

Learning Environment

Students with disabilities may require accommodations that involve changes to the classroom environment. This may include grouping or seating arrangements, behavioral expectations, and/or classroom management procedures. Specific examples of learning environment accommodations include:

- Modify seating arrangements (proximity to teacher or peer helper, provide an alternate quiet area or study carrel, or minimize distractions by seating away from windows, doors, vents, and disruptive students).
- Give the student opportunities to get up and move in the classroom.
- Use verbal or written feedback depending on student limitations.
- Establish a reward system and incentives; that is, devise student contracts with specific behavioral objectives, including means to signal that behavior is not appropriate.
- Provide advance organizers; that is, arrange a check-in time to organize the day to give the student a preview of what is going to happen ahead of time.
- Pair a student with a peer, aide, or volunteer for some assignments or to serve as a study buddy to repeat or explain directions.
- Provide a set of alternative activities for the student during unstructured time.
- Establish a consistent routine for transitions in the classroom.

Instructional Methods and Materials

It is important when implementing accommodations for students with disabilities to consider the expectations for learning and practicing of new knowledge and skills. Common learning problems in children with disabilities include limited reading abilities, difficulty understanding orally presented information, and/or difficulty understanding mathematical concepts and processes.

Reading accommodations. For students with limited reading abilities, the following accommodations may be useful:

- Provide the student with the summary and vocabulary ahead of time.
- Have the student read the questions first and look for the answers.

- Use graphic organizers such as markers and sticky notes to sort, arrange, and place mark important text or concepts.
- Provide an audio version of the material.
- Provide alternative materials at a lower reading level with similar content.
- Use mnemonic devices.

Oral language accommodations. For students who have difficulty understanding information presented orally, suggested accommodations include:

- Use visual aids (overhead, charts, whiteboards) and hands-on materials.
- Provide written notes or outlines.
- Use cooperative learning techniques.
- Use oral cues and repeat, paraphrase, and summarize key material.
- Allow the use of a tape recorder.
- Have the student repeat or write down important information.

Math accommodations. For students who have difficulty in understanding mathematical concepts and processes, research and practice suggest that the following may be helpful:

- Allow use of a table with math facts and a calculator for routine computation.
- Highlight key words in word problems.
- Use a flowchart to demonstrate steps for problem solving.
- Provide clear and well-defined worksheets.

Time Demands and Scheduling

A third type of accommodation involves altering the timing of task demands and the scheduling of academic tasks. Students with disabilities may work or learn at a slower pace than other students. Some achieve better when they are not required to complete assignments under specified time constraints. Suggestions for teachers implementing accommodations related to altering time demands include:

- Allow more time to complete assignments.
- Give assignments ahead of time and provide a schedule of upcoming due dates; that is, help the student prioritize assignments.
- Give the students shorter assignments that measure the same objectives, such as completing every other item on a worksheet.
- Allow the student to engage in a desired activity after completion of a required assignment.

- Help to maintain attention to tasks by breaking task into smaller segments, scheduling shorter work periods, more frequent breaks, using time-specific assignments, or using a timer.

Use of Special Communication Systems

Some students with disabilities may require the use of specialized communication systems. Many types of communication systems are available to students depending on their unique needs, such as sign language, finger spelling, and lip reading for students who are deaf; amplified hearing devices or word processing devices such as an AlphaSmart; and communication boards and other augmentative devices. Teachers who work with students who need alternative communication systems will need training in the use of these systems.

Modifying Assignments

In many instances, students with disabilities need accommodations for particular types of classroom assignments or instructional presentations. Students may experience problems because they have difficulty following instructions, completing assignments, organizing materials, and writing.

Instructions. For students who experience difficulty following instructions, the following accommodations may be useful:

- Use a prearranged cue or signal to gain attention.
- Combine oral directions with pictures, diagrams, or words.
- Read directions to the student before starting assignments, repeat or simply have student paraphrase directions.
- Model expected behavior or complete an example of the task.

Completing assignments. For students who demonstrate difficulty completing assignments, the suggestions supplied for modifying timing and scheduling will be helpful. Additional suggestions for enhancing work completion include:

- Provide an individual checklist of responsibilities.
- Give the student a choice of tasks or assignments.
- Communicate assignments and expectations to parents so that they can help, if needed.
- Give partial credit for late or incomplete work and then increase the expectations until the student is able to complete the work on time.

Organization. For students with organizational difficulties, the following accommodations may be useful:

- Use graph paper for aligning math problems or fold paper to delineate sections on the paper.
- Number steps to directions.
- Use clear, uncluttered worksheets.
- Use folders, plastic containers, or bags for storing materials and dividers or color-coding to keep subjects organized.
- Allow the student to keep a second set of textbooks at home.
- Provide consistent routines such as a specific place for turning in assignments or homework.
- Check to be sure the student has the appropriate books and materials open to the correct page or use a peer helper to monitor.

Writing. For students with limited writing ability, the following accommodations may be useful:

- Provide copies of notes or use carbon paper to allow another student to make a copy of notes.
- Accept key word responses instead of complete sentences.
- Reduce the amount of copying from the board or book; let the student write in the workbook or on a copy.
- Use oral responding, word processing, and other alternatives to handwritten assignments.
- Allow for spelling errors or allow use of a spell-checking device or spelling dictionary.
- Allow the student to use pencil grips, erasable pens, or paper with raised lines.
- Allow the use of planning software to plan ideas before writing.

Assessments

Accommodations used for tests, including state and district standards tests, should reflect the accommodations provided for instruction. Accommodations during testing can address the test's presentation format (oral versus written instructions, and questions), response demands (written, oral, typed, dictated, use of answer sheet), test procedures (timed versus untimed, use of calculator or other aids), and setting (individual versus group administration, breaks during testing, study carrels and other means of reducing distractions). See the "Resources" below for more information about test accommodations.

Summary

This handout is intended to direct teachers and other team members to consider relevant factors when determining the need for accommodations for some of their students. Common practice in which students with

disabilities are afforded all or most of the accommodations linked to their disability for testing situations has not been shown to be helpful or fair in assessing student mastery of required content. The examples of accommodations provided are intended to assist teachers in ways to support the achievement of students with disabilities in the classroom. It should not be assumed that students will need all or even most of the accommodations listed.

Decisions regarding which, if any, accommodations are necessary should be made on an individual basis for each student using all available data regarding the student's needs and past performance. The value of accommodations should be measured by the extent to which they create an academic environment where barriers to learning and performing have been removed for students with disabilities, placing them in the same position as non-disabled students.

Resources

- Council for Exceptional Children. (2000). *Making assessment accommodations: A toolkit for educators*. Arlington, VA: Author. ISBN: 0-86586-962-6.
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- Schwab Foundation for Learning. (1996). *Classroom accommodations*. Available: www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/teachers/teaching-2.html
- Vallecorsa, A., deBettencourt, L., & Zigmund, N. (2000). *Students with mild disabilities in general education settings*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. ISBN: 002422371-9.

Websites

The National Center on Educational Outcomes—
www.education.umn.edu/NCEO

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