

No Child Left Behind: Determining Appropriate Assessment Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

By: [Candace Cortiella](#)



Assessment accommodations help people with learning disabilities display their skills accurately on examinations. Teachers, learn how to test the true knowledge of your students. Don't test their ability to write quickly if you want to see their science skills! Parents, these pointers will help you assure that your children are tested fairly.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is the nation's major federal law related to education in grades pre-kindergarten through high school. In its most recent Congressional reauthorization, ESEA became known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Under NCLB public school students throughout the country must participate in annual testing in specific academic areas and grades outlined in the law, including students with disabilities. Requiring the inclusion of all students with disabilities in state- and district-wide assessments helps ensure that schools, school districts and states are held accountable for the achievement of these students.

According to NCLB, students with disabilities (those covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act) must be provided the appropriate accommodation necessary to participate in these tests. Making determinations about the appropriate accommodations that students with disabilities need in order to fully and equally participate in large scale testing is a critical component of developing a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Plan. IEP/504 team members, including parents, must engage in a thoughtful process that determines the necessary accommodations to facilitate the student's access to grade level instruction and full participation in state/district assessments. The selection of appropriate accommodations is the focus of this parent advocacy brief.

Understanding accommodations

Accommodations are tools and procedures that provide equal access to instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. They are provided to "level the playing field." Without

accommodations, students with disabilities may not be able to access grade level instruction and participate fully on assessments.

Accommodations are generally grouped into the following categories:

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

Accommodation vs. modification

Accommodations are not the same as modifications. Accommodations are intended to lessen the effects of a student's disability; they are not intended to reduce learning expectations. Changing, lowering or reducing learning expectations is usually referred to as a modification or alteration. Unlike accommodations, consistent use of modifications can increase the gap between the achievement of students with disabilities and the grade level expectations. This may have a negative impact on the student's educational career as the student may not continue to progress and be able to obtain a regular diploma.

Assessment vs. instruction accommodation

Ideally, accommodations should be the same or similar across classroom instruction, classroom tests and state/district tests. However, it is important to note that some accommodations are only for instruction and cannot be used on state/district assessments.

Standard vs. non-standard accommodation

Standard accommodations are those allowed for both testing and instruction that do not change the skill that is being tested. A non-standard accommodation is one that will change the nature of the task, or target skill. For example, reading a reading test aloud to the student when the reading test is measuring decoding generally is considered a non-standard accommodation because it would not result in a true measure of the student's decoding ability. If, however, the test is measuring reading comprehension, reading the test would not change the target skill and would allow the student to demonstrate comprehension skill without the interference of a reading disability.

Policies regarding standard and non-standard testing accommodations vary by state. All IEP/504 team members need to be familiar with state policies and guidelines regarding the use of assessment accommodations. Making sound decisions about testing accommodations requires all team members to know:

- The test (content, types of test questions and testing conditions)
- The state's testing guidelines
- The state's accommodation guidelines
- What accommodations will invalidate a test score.

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Choosing accommodations

All students with disabilities (those with active IEPs or 504 Plans), are entitled to the appropriate accommodations that allow them to fully participate in state- and district-wide testing.

Who decides?

The student's IEP/504 team selects the accommodations for both instruction and assessments. Accommodations should be chosen on the basis of the individual student's needs, not on the basis of the disability category, grade level or instructional setting. Once selected, accommodations should be used consistently for instruction and assessment. Each teacher and others responsible for the implementation of the accommodations must be informed of the specific accommodations that must be provided.

Selecting accommodations

Determining necessary accommodations should be part of the development of each IEP or 504 Plan. These questions should be considered in the selection process:

- What are the student's learning strengths and needs?
- How do the student's learning needs affect the achievement of the grade level content standards?
- What specialized instruction does the student need to achieve the grade level content standards?

Next, discuss and review the accommodations the student has already been using. Ask these questions:

- What accommodations is the student regularly using in the classroom and on tests?
- What is the student's perception of how well an accommodation has worked?
- Has the student been willing to use the accommodation?
- What are the perceptions of the parents, teachers and others about how the accommodations appear to have worked?
- Have there been difficulties administering the selected accommodations?

When deciding on new accommodations, plan how and when the student will learn to use each new accommodation. Be sure there is plenty of time to learn to use an accommodation before it will be part of the administration of a state- and district-wide assessment.

Assessment facts

Many states have chosen to add "stakes" for students to their standards and assessment systems. In some states, students are required to pass one or more high school assessments as a condition of receiving a diploma.

Some states require students to achieve at certain levels on assessments to be promoted to subsequent grades. It is imperative for parents to understand the implications of student performance on tests required by your state.

Evaluating accommodations

Evaluating how effective the accommodations are should be an ongoing process — only by closely reviewing the impact of an accommodation can improvements happen. IEP or 504 teams should not assume that accommodation selection carries over from year to year. Each year the team should review:

- Each accommodation and the results of tests when the accommodation was used
- Student's perception of how well each accommodation is working
- Effective combinations of accommodations
- Perceptions of teachers, paraprofessionals and other specialists about how the accommodations appear to be working.

Important terms to know

- **Presentation accommodations** allow students to access information in ways that do not require them to visually read standard print. These alternate modes of access are auditory, multi-sensory, tactile and visual.
- **Response accommodations** allow students to complete activities, assignments and tests in different ways to solve or organize problems using some type of assistive device or organizer.
- **Timing/scheduling accommodations** increase the allowable length of time to complete a test or assignment and may also change the way the time is organized. Setting Accommodations change the location in which a test or assignment is given or the conditions of the assessment setting.

Guide to choosing accommodations

	Who can benefit	Questions to ask	Examples
Presentation accommodations	Students with print disabilities, defined as difficulty or inability to visually read standard print because of a physical, sensory or cognitive disability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the student read and understand directions? • Does the student need directions repeated frequently? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large Print • Magnification Devices • Human Reader • Audio Tapes • Screen Reader • Talking Materials

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the student been identified as having a reading disability? 	(calculators; clocks, timers)
Response accommodations	Students with physical, sensory or learning disabilities (including difficulties with memory, sequencing, directionality, alignment and organization).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the student use a pencil or other writing instrument? • Does the student have a disability that affects his ability to spell? • Does the student have trouble with tracking from one page to another and maintaining her place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scribe • Note-takers • Tape Recorder • Respond on Test Booklet • Spelling and Grammar devices • Graphic Organizers
Timing & scheduling accommodations	Students who need more time, cannot concentrate for extended periods, have health-related disabilities, fatigue easily, special diet and/or medication needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can student work continuously during the entire time allocated for test administration? • Does student tire easily because of health impairments? • Does student need shorter working periods and frequent breaks? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended time • Frequent Breaks • Multiple testing sessions
Setting accommodations	Students who are easily distracted in large group settings, concentrate best in small groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do others easily distract the student? • Does student have trouble staying on task? • Does student exhibit behaviors that would 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change of room or location in room • Earphone or headphones • Study carrels

disrupt other students?

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Questions parents should ask about assessment accommodations

Be sure that accommodations don't lead to inappropriate testing practices such as:

- Coaching students during testing
- Editing student work
- Allowing a student to answer fewer questions
- Giving clues to test answers in any way
- Reducing the number of responses required
- Changing the content by paraphrasing or offering additional information

Is my child using accommodations during classroom instruction that will not be allowed when taking state- or district-wide assessments?

Because of the nature of certain accommodations, they are only allowed for instruction, not testing. If a student is accustomed to using such accommodations, the IEP team needs to make certain the student understands that a particular accommodation(s) won't be available during testing and work to find acceptable accommodations that can support the student during testing in a comparable manner.

Are the assessment accommodations selected for my child considered "standard" or "non-standard"?

There is tremendous variance across states regarding testing accommodation policies. Be sure to obtain a copy of your state guidelines and policies regarding assessment accommodations. These guidelines should include information on whether accommodations are considered "standard" or "non-standard" as well as information on any accommodations that might invalidate a test score.

Does my child show a documented need for all selected accommodations?

Research has shown that IEP or 504 Plan teams frequently select accommodations in a bundle, such as extended time and a different setting. However, the student might only need one of these accommodations. The IEP team has a responsibility to make sure the student is neither under — or over — accommodated.

Are all selected accommodations documented in my child's IEP or 504 Plan?

The student's active IEP or 504 Plan should contain documentation for all accommodations that have been selected, both for instruction and testing. Once documented in the IEP or 504 Plan, accommodations must be provided. Those responsible for implementing accommodations must understand the accommodations are mandatory, not optional.

Does my child understand how to use the assessment accommodations that have been selected?

Students should have ample time to learn to use the accommodations available to them during testing. Be sure the student is willing to use the accommodation and has used the accommodation before test day.

Does the school have an advance planning process to ensure the proper implementation of the testing accommodations chosen and documented in my child's IEP or 504 Plan?

Accommodations are only as effective as their proper implementation. Unfortunately, administering individual student accommodations can become difficult on testing days, when school staffs are stretched. Advance planning for accommodations such as quiet space, readers, and alternative formats of tests is critical to ethical administration of assessment accommodations.

[The National Center for Learning Disabilities](#), Inc., is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that the nation's 15 million children and adults with learning disabilities have every opportunity to succeed in school, work, and life. Schwab Learning is a nonprofit program of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation dedicated to helping kids with learning and attention problems be successful in school and life. Candace Cortiella is Director of [The Advocacy Institute](#), a nonprofit focused on improving the lives of people with learning disabilities through public policy and other initiatives. This publication was made possible with funding from the [Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation](#).

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