
ACCOMMODATIONS FOR TESTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

By Sara Bolt, MA
National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota



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Today's schools are increasingly being held accountable for student achievement. Schools must demonstrate that teachers provide quality instruction that results in students making progress toward standards.

Standards Testing for All Students

State- and district-wide assessment programs have been developed to measure the extent to which students are acquiring important skills and knowledge. Recent legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has created additional requirements for state-wide testing and demonstrating student progress. Results from these tests are used to make a variety of important decisions. In several states and districts, test results are used in high-stakes decision making (e.g., student grade promotion, high school graduation). Tests are typically administered annually to a whole class at a time in basic subjects such as reading, math, science, and social studies. Many of these tests require students to listen to or read questions and mark or write out their answers, often within a specified time limit.

All students, including students with disabilities, are expected to participate in state and district assessment programs. However, students with disabilities sometimes have trouble showing what they know on tests because of very strict rules about how the tests are to be given. These rules are created for a good reason: to make sure that the test measures the same skills for all students. Unfortunately, these rules can create problems for students with disabilities. For example, students with print disabilities (students with visual impairments or those with reading disabilities) may not be able to show their knowledge on a math test that is only given in standard print. These students may need to have the test read aloud or be provided with a large print or Braille edition of the test.

As a result of these and similar concerns, testing accommodations are often necessary in order for students with disabilities to show their true knowledge on a test. Because tests are being used more than ever before to make important decisions about students, classrooms, and schools, it is important to make sure that students with disabilities are provided the support they need on a test so that they can show what they really know and can do.

Testing Accommodations

A testing accommodation is any change in typical test procedures that allows students with disabilities to better show their knowledge. This might include a change in:

- How the test is *presented* (Braille, large print, sign language, having test directions and items read aloud)
- How the student *responds* (using a computer, marking answers in a test booklet rather than responding on a separate "bubble" answer sheet)
- Test *scheduling* (extended time for a timed test, more frequent breaks, special time of day)
- Test *setting* (taking the test individually or in a small group, rather than with the entire class)

These are just some examples of accommodations that can allow individual students to better demonstrate their knowledge. Many other accommodations may also be needed.

Legal Basis for Test Accommodations

Disability legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that appropriate accommodations be provided to students with disabilities, as necessary, on state- and district-wide tests.

All states have a testing accommodations policy that describes which accommodations are typically allowed on the state- and district-wide tests as well as guidelines for making decisions about testing accommodations. An online link to any state's accommodation policy can be found at the National Center on Educational Outcomes website. (See "Websites" section below.)

Almost all students with disabilities take state- and district-wide tests, either with or without accommodations. Proposed NCLB regulations suggest that no more than 1% of all students should take an alternate assessment, which is an assessment designed only for students with very significant cognitive disabilities who cannot take the regular test, even with accommodations. Decisions about accommodations should be made by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which consists of teachers, other school support personnel, parents, and the student, and then the decision about accommodation must be documented on the IEP.

Key Strategies for Testing Accommodations

The following strategies are recommended in order to help make good decisions about which accommodations a student should receive:

- *Consider the specific needs of your child:* As a parent, you can offer a valuable perspective on what support your child may need in order to show knowledge and skill. When making accommodation decisions, consider what test changes you think will help your child to demonstrate that knowledge. Asking children what will help them do well on the test can also provide valuable information and ideas about possible testing accommodations.
- *Find out whether there are accommodations provided as a part of your child's classroom instruction:* In many cases, accommodations that are provided during instruction can also be provided during a test. Your child may already be receiving extra time to complete assignments or may use an audiotape recording to work through math word problems. If such accommodations are provided during instruction, these accommodations can often be provided during a test.
- *When possible, choose accommodations that do not stray very far from standard conditions:* Standard conditions are used for a reason: to make sure the same skills and knowledge are tested across all students who take the test. It is therefore usually best to provide accommodations that do not stray too far from standard conditions. For example, it is

often necessary to provide accommodations to students who cannot use a pencil on a writing test. Two accommodation options might be having students use a computer to respond or having students tell their responses to a teacher. If the student can write using a computer, this will probably be a better accommodation option, because the student will actually be writing, and will not also have to show good dictating skills, which might include spelling words when speaking and explaining where punctuation belongs. Similarly, if a student can read and understand a test, but needs more time to read, it will probably be more appropriate to have the student read the test with extra time rather than to use a "read-aloud" accommodation, in which a teacher reads the test to the student. Of course, this must be weighed against several factors. For example, if the student is an extremely slow reader, and will likely perform better if the test were read aloud, the read-aloud accommodation might be more appropriate. When making accommodation decisions like these, always strive for a plan that provides an appropriate balance between meeting your child's needs and testing under standard conditions.

- *Check to be sure that the accommodation helps your child:* Sometimes accommodations are not helpful to students. It is always wise to have teachers verify that an accommodation does not interfere with your child's performance and is in fact helpful.
- *Be aware of how the accommodation decision may affect future student opportunities:* In some states, a student must take the test under standard conditions in order to receive a standard diploma. Accommodated test scores are sometimes reported differently than those for non-accommodated administrations. Accommodated test scores may or may not be included in overall school scores, and may be reported in a way that makes it difficult to compare performance across schools and students. It is important to understand all such related consequences of providing accommodations when making individual decisions. It is always best to make sure that your child has the opportunity to take the test under *standard* conditions if this might increase future opportunities. It is also important to advocate for policies that will allow your child to use appropriate accommodations on tests.
- *Make sure that all relevant professionals are part of the decision-making process:* Get input from as many different professionals and family members as possible about how your child can best show knowledge and skills. Make sure that all current

teachers (both regular and special education) are part of the decision-making process for your child. It also is important that your child communicates ideas and thoughts about what accommodations might be helpful.

- *Make accommodation decisions annually:* Your child's needs often change from year to year. It is best to annually reconsider which (if any) testing accommodations are needed.

Key Strategies for Administering Testing Accommodations

If it is decided that your child needs accommodations:

- *Make sure that someone at the school is responsible for your child's testing accommodations:* Testing days can be very hectic days for schools. It is always best to make sure that there is one person at the school responsible for your child's accommodations. This way, your child can be sure to get the accommodations that are needed.
- *Make sure that your child feels comfortable with the accommodations, and has received the appropriate accommodations during instruction:* If students have never received accommodations before the testing day, they may not know how to make the best use of them. For instance, if a child is supposed to use a computer to respond to a test, but does not know how to use it, the child will probably not perform very well on the test. Make sure that your child has had experience using the accommodations that will be used on the test. Usually this means providing the same accommodation during your child's instruction, such as using a computer to complete written tasks.
- *Those who are administering your child's accommodations should be well trained:* Some accommodations need to be provided by a test proctor. For example, some students have a test read aloud by a teacher or dictate their responses to a scribe. It is important for those who provide accommodations to know how to best administer them. Training is sometimes necessary for these people to do their job well, and to make sure that they do not confuse or bias student responses.
- *Make sure your child knows why accommodations are provided, and how to advocate for accommodations in future settings:* Help your child to understand that accommodations can help in demonstrating true abilities on tests. Many accommodations that your child may receive during instruction and testing can be applied in future work settings.

- *Help your child understand how to advocate for accommodations, as needed, in college and employment settings:* Simple accommodations may be exactly what are needed for your child to be successful in today's world.

Resources

- Council for Exceptional Children. (2000). *Making assessment accommodations video: A guide for families*. Arlington, VA: Author. ISBN: 0-86586-963-4.
- Elliott, S. N., Braden, J. P., & White, J. L. (2001). *Assessing one and all: Educational accountability for students with disabilities*. Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children. ISBN: 0-86586-375-X.
- Elliott, S. N., Kratochwill, T. R., & Gilbertson, A. (1998). *The assessment accommodations guide*. Monterey, CA: CTB/McGraw-Hill. (Available for purchase at www.ctb.com)
- Thurlow, M., & Elliott, J. (2000). *Improving test performance of students with disabilities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ISBN: 0-76197-550-4.
- Thurlow, M., Elliott, J., & Ysseldyke, J. (2002). *Testing students with disabilities: Practical strategies for complying with district and state requirements* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ISBN: 0-76193-809-5.

Websites

- Federation for Children with Special Needs—
www.fcsn.org/peer/ess/esshome.html
- National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO)—
www.education.umn.edu/NCEO/ (See
www.education.umn.edu/NCEO/TopicAreas/Accommodations/Accomm_topic.htm)

Sara Bolt, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the School Psychology Program at the University of Minnesota and a research assistant at the National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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