The Best Choice

Choosing effective accommodations for students with disabilities requires administrators, teachers, and parents to work together to evaluate the students’ individual needs.

By Rebecca S. Martínez and Lisa A. Humphreys

Today, more than ever, students with disabilities are educated in general education classrooms. In fact, more than half of all special education students spend most of their days learning alongside general education students, and approximately 96% of general education teachers have at some point taught students with disabilities in their classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The challenge is to ensure that inclusion genuinely allows students to achieve the same educational goals as general education students. A large portion of this responsibility falls on general educators and their school administrators. Their success depends on their understanding and appropriately implementing academic accommodations. In particular, principals must understand the process, how to equip their staff members with the necessary skills, and how those skills are applied at the secondary school level.

What Are Academic Accommodations?

Academic accommodations are designed to support students with disabilities so that they can profit from the curriculum and the activities available to the general population of students. Accommodations are not intended to water down the curriculum or reduce academic expectations but rather to provide equity in access to the general curriculum. Academic accommodations are not the same as academic modifications or adaptations. When an academic “adaptation” is made for a student, he or she participates in the same activity as his or her peers but an adaptation or variation is made to the materials or learning strategies used in the lesson or to the curricular goals and outcome expectations. Academic or instructional “accommodations” are based on a student’s individual needs and are intended to help the student do the same work and meet the same outcome goals as his or her peers.

Reasonable academic accommodations (and adaptations) for students with disabilities are most often established by the students’ IEP teams and are selected to meet individual students’ needs. It is imperative that the principal provides IEP team members access to information and resources that will help them make informed decisions about which accommodations are most appropriate for individual students. Related services personnel—such as school counselors, school psychologists, speech-language therapists, special education teachers, and reading specialists—are invaluable IEP team members who should be encouraged to help the team generate effective and reasonable accommodations for individual students.

Issues Related to Secondary School Education

Selecting, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of academic accommodations for students with documented disabilities present unique challenges to secondary general education teachers and administrators. Teacher training at this level generally emphasizes content-area knowledge and includes little, if any, training in best practices in special education. The lack of adequate preparation makes it difficult for many general educators to implement optimally effective academic modifications (Hutchinson & Ma, 1999).

In many cases, teachers are left on their own to figure out how to apply academic accommodations and individualize their instruction. As a result, they may not make any accommodations (Harris, Fink-Chorempa, & MacArthur, 2003), or when they do, they are more likely to apply general, classwide accommodations rather than the individualized adaptations and accommodations required by law (Leyser & Tappendorf, 2001). One study found that only one in four general educators routinely adapts and individualizes teaching to meet specific students’ needs (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992).

The problem is compounded by the fact that secondary school teachers see a vast number of students during the school day, making it especially difficult to get to know students and their individual academic strengths and needs. Even the most talented and dedicated secondary education teacher may have

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How Can Principals Promote Inclusive Practices?

- Ensure that general education teachers have the resources and materials they need to work with all students in their classrooms. A needs assessment can help identify training and consultation needs among teachers.
- Support general education teachers by providing ample opportunities to attend professional development workshops. Provide on-site training as well as incentives for teachers to attend local and national conventions that provide information for expanding their problem-solving repertoires.
- Encourage teachers to search the Internet or the local university library for research-based intervention strategies that they can implement in their classrooms. Ask staff members to contribute to an inclusion resource file and Web site list for the school. School psychologists can direct teachers to good references and provide examples of best practice strategies.
- Promote leadership opportunities among teachers. Identify a small team of educators to serve as on-site resources on inclusion practices.
- Offer blocks of time during the school day for general and special education teachers to prepare lesson plans together and collaborate on effective instructional strategies. Provide a time and place for interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Maintain a high set of standards and expectations for the success of all teachers and students. Foster a school climate that promotes unity, celebrates diversity, and maintains high academic standards for all students.
- Support and develop programs that promote students’ transition to postsecondary education and employment. IEP teams should work with students and their families to explore transition possibilities early and on an ongoing basis.
- Become familiar with appropriate adaptations and accommodations for making the general curriculum, including statewide accountability testing, available for students with disabilities.

difficulty ensuring that academic accommodations are tied to students’ IEP goals, delivered appropriately and consistently, and evaluated for their effectiveness toward meeting the IEP goals.

Another issue related to secondary school students is the pressure of statewide assessments that determine not only school performance but also graduation. Clearly, students who receive proper accommodations will have better access to content and be better able to complete course work and better prepared for tests. Ideally, accommodations used on assessments should be linked to those used in the classroom.

The Role of the Principal

There are many ways that principals can facilitate inclusion as well as support teachers’ implementation of academic accommodations. In fact, the principal determines the climate and degree to which this process is successful. Principals must provide staff members with adequate training, access to support personnel, and opportunities for professional development regarding best
practices in teaching students with disabilities. It also is important that principals know the relevant provisions of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) so they can help staff members establish proper systems for assessing needs and making decisions on an ongoing basis. Further, principals should consider three key factors in the provision of reasonable academic accommodations: selecting appropriate accommodations and including them in the IEP, effectively implementing the IEP accommodations, and evaluating the effectiveness of the academic accommodations in meeting the student’s academic goals as determined by the IEP.

**Legal Mandates**

Although the language of IDEA (originally enacted in 1975 and reauthorized in 1997 and 2004) does not use the term inclusion, the statute clearly calls on public education institutions, both elementary and secondary, to educate all students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with typically achieving peers to the maximum extent appropriate. That is, all school-age children have the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Consistently implementing effective and reasonable academic accommodations in general education classrooms makes it possible for many students with disabilities to access the general curriculum, thereby ensuring that students are indeed receiving an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

IDEA 1997 and IDEA 2004 require that states construct academic standards for students with disabilities that are aligned, to the greatest degree possible, with the standards for students in general education (Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001). Thus, students with disabilities must be included in the accountability-driven testing initiatives, including those falling under the NCLB.

**Determining Appropriate Academic Accommodations**

Appropriate instructional accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis. The selection of academic accommodations should be based on the data (e.g., present levels of performance) presented at the IEP meeting by parents and school personnel who know the student. Accordingly, teams should not rely on a generic “menu” of academic accommodations that are based on the student’s disability label (Hatcher & Waguespack, 2004).

Accommodations do not need to be complicated. Some of the most effective accommodations for students may be the simplest strategies. Appropriate academic accommodations may be made with respect to methods and materials (e.g., hard copies of notes and breaking lessons into smaller segments), assignments and assessments (e.g., modified assignments and extra time to complete work), or the learning environment (e.g., preferential seating and small-group instruction).

Rather than over-accommodate, the IEP team must be selective in choosing realistic accommodations that will allow the student access to the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible, on the basis of the particular manifestation of his or her disability. For example, if a student with a disability will benefit from having class materials presented in large print, then such an accommodation should be provided regardless of whether the student has low vision or a

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**Determined Appropriate Accommodations**

As much as possible, data-based decision making should be used to determine whether and what accommodations are needed. The following questions may be helpful in making this determination:

- 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 or his or her ability to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skill?
- How can student strengths be used in planning for appropriate accommodations?
- Are classroom data available that support the use of specific accommodations for the student? Have teachers evaluated whether accommodations remove barriers for the student?


**Characteristics of Accommodations**

Accommodations are considered reasonable and appropriate to the extent to which they remove disability-related barriers to ensure that students with disabilities receive the same access to learning and demonstrate the same knowledge and skills as a nondisabled peer. Most states typically group accommodations into four categories:

- Presentation (e.g., repeating directions, reading aloud, using modified answer sheets, and using special communications systems)
- Response (e.g., marking answers in book, using reference aids, and pointing)
- Setting (e.g., study carrel, special lighting, separate room, study partners, consistent routines for transition)
- Timing/scheduling (e.g., receiving extended time, taking frequent breaks, receiving assignments ahead of time, breaking assignments into smaller tasks)

learning disability. Principals can facilitate the selection of appropriate accommodations for students by highlighting the importance of focusing on the individual student, not the student’s label or disability. At the secondary school level, students themselves can be great resources in the selection of appropriate accommodations. Staff members can simply ask students what can be done in the classroom to help them learn better—they often know.

**Implementing Accommodations in Secondary Classrooms**

Principals can be especially effective in setting a climate of responsibility, concern, and willingness to provide students with appropriate accommodations. To best accommodate students’ needs, teachers must become familiar with effective adaptations and accommodations for giving students with disabilities access to the general curriculum, including accommodations to participate in statewide accountability testing. Principals can conduct a needs assessment to determine what resources teachers already have and what types of additional resources would be beneficial to their students.

Determining areas of strength and need among staff members makes it possible to facilitate meaningful connections between teachers and relevant support staff members as well as incorporate outside resources and training when appropriate. School psychologists can be particularly helpful in consulting with teachers to create and implement accommodations consistent with the IEP. Some accommodations are easier to implement than others and take minimal effort. The IEP team’s goal should be to identify the most effective and simplest accommodations appropriate to the student’s specific needs in each class.

**Evaluating the Effectiveness of Accommodations**

The law states that IEP goals must be measurable so that progress (or lack of progress) toward the goals can be objectively assessed at least annually. As such, any academic accommodations used should be documented in the student’s IEP so their effectiveness can be formally evaluated at the same time. In doing so, the IEP team should carefully consider whether the academic accommodations are facilitating access to the general curriculum. If the services provided to the student, including instructional adaptations and accommodations, are effective, then a student should make objective progress toward his or her annual IEP goals. As students move through school, especially if IEPs are reviewed only annually, the IEP team must keep in mind that the student’s needs for accommodation will change over time.

There are many strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of academic accommodations. In addition to measuring actual progress toward IEP goals (e.g., using curriculum-based measures of reading fluency or math calculation skills, testing reading comprehension, etc.), teams should gather data that indicate the extent to which planned accommodations were actually implemented and consider the student’s perspective regarding the usefulness of the accommodations.

**Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of academic accommodations is to help students with disabilities succeed in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible.

Regrettably, inclusion at the secondary school level has not received the same attention as inclusion at the elementary level in terms of research, funding and resources, policy recommendations, and professional development opportunities. Secondary school administrators must seek out needed expertise, empower staff members, and implement the processes to make genuine inclusion a reality for their students.

**References**