

Accommodations Decisions for IEP Teams

Making the best possible decisions regarding accommodations for individual students with disabilities is a critical but difficult task. As the statewide assessment system continues to evolve, Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams are faced with the corresponding tasks of determining which assessment is most appropriate for a given student, as well as how to administer the assessment with accommodations that mirror those used in classroom instruction. The purpose of this article is to provide some reminders about what accommodations are, outline the goal of providing them, discuss some recommended questions that IEP Teams should ask during the accommodations selection process, and give some guidance on how the effectiveness of accommodations for individual students might be determined. Much of the information in this article comes from documents prepared by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Assessing Special Education Students (ASES) State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS), in which Michigan is an active member.

Accommodations in General

Many special education service providers are exceedingly familiar with what accommodations are and how students should use them. However, since the use of accommodations in statewide assessment has potentially serious consequences for students and districts, it is useful to revisit their definitions and the thought processes behind providing them. It also is important to remember that (1) many assessment accommodations, such as having a mathematics assessment read to the student, need to be provided in a one-on-one situation; and (2) assessment accommodations should only be used if the student's IEP indicates that they are appropriate for the student, and they reflect what the student routinely uses or how he or she routinely responds during instruction.

Fundamentally, accommodations are tools and procedures in the areas of presentation, response, timing/scheduling, and setting that provide access to instruction and assessment for students with disabilities. It is important to bear in mind that accommodations minimize the effects of a student's disability and do not reduce learning expectations. They provide a means for accessing the content and instruction being provided. The four general categories into which nearly all accommodations fit are described below.

- **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 visual, tactile, auditory, and multi-sensory.
- **Response accommodations** allow students to complete assignments, assessments, and activities in different ways or to solve or organize problems using some type of assistive device or organizer.
- **Timing/Scheduling accommodations** increase the time allowed to complete

an assessment or assignment and may also change the way the time is organized.

- **Setting accommodations** change the location in which an assessment or assignment is given or the conditions of the assessment setting.

In contrast to providing access to content through accommodations, modifications are alterations in learning or assessment expectations. Examples of modifications include requiring a student to learn less material, or revising assessments or assignments to make them easier. Since modifications, or nonstandard accommodations, change either the scope or content being measured, they should be considered carefully for use on statewide assessments. If a student uses a modification or nonstandard accommodation when administered any of Michigan's state-level assessments, the student will count as not participating in the assessment, which will impact No Child Left Behind (NCLB) participation rates.

Goals of Accommodations Provision

The primary driving force behind providing accommodations is access. In the case of students with disabilities, that means access to grade-level content to the greatest extent possible based on the nature of the disability. To make this possible, every IEP Team member must be familiar with the state's content standards and local curricula. In order to effectively reach decisions that will have the maximum beneficial impact for students, collaboration between general and special educators is paramount. Accommodations must be utilized consistently and appropriately if students are to have access to the educational content they deserve. As illustrated below, the use of accommodations should be linked across instruction and assessments, as well as constitute a fundamental part of each student's ecology.



Selecting Accommodations

Making accommodations a part of a student's academic experience is an important decision that should not be taken lightly. IEP Teams need to consider several issues before making any decisions. For example, IEP Teams should never check off every accommodation available in the *Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability (OEAA) Assessment Accommodation Summary*

Table or employ as many standard accommodations as possible on an assessment hoping that “something” will work. Instead, they should work to match a student’s particular needs with the accommodations that can best address them.

Following are four different lists of questions, issues, and actions that IEP Teams may want to use to guide their discussions about selecting accommodations for students with newly identified disabilities or reviewing those that are already in use.

Guiding Questions to Consider

- What are the student’s learning strengths and needs?
- How do the student’s needs affect the achievement of grade level content standards?
- What specialized instruction (e.g., learning strategies, organizational skills, and/or reading skills) does the student need to achieve grade level content standards?
- What accommodations will increase the student’s access to instruction and assessment?

Reviewing Current Accommodations

- What accommodations are currently used by the student in the classroom and on assessments?
- What were the assessment and assignment results when accommodations were used and not used?
- Were any effective combinations of accommodations used?
- Were there any difficulties related to the accommodations used?
- What was the student’s perception of how well the accommodations “worked?”
- What were the perceptions of the parents, teachers, and specialists about how well the accommodations “worked?”

Considering New Accommodations

- What are the student’s access needs and what possible accommodations could he/she try? (Make a list.)
- Of the accommodations on the list, consider
 - the student’s willingness to learn to use the accommodations,
 - the opportunities that are available to learn how to use them in classroom settings, and
 - the conditions for using them on state assessments.

Planning for the Use of New Accommodations

- How will the student learn to use each new accommodation? (Develop a plan.)
- Is there plenty of time for the student to learn to use the instructional and assessment accommodations before testing?
- How can we evaluate and improve the use of accommodations on an ongoing basis?

Involving students in the process of selecting their own accommodations can greatly increase the chance that they will be used and that the student will benefit from their use. In addition, it can help students start seeing accommodations as part of their everyday life, and lead to discussions about how they might be used outside of school.

The OEAA Assessment Accommodation Summary Table

While the questions and issues listed above are useful in guiding discussions about accommodations, it is also helpful to have a list of commonly used accommodations as a reminder of what can be considered for statewide assessment. The purpose of the State Board of Education (SBE)-approved *OEAA Assessment Accommodation Summary Table* is to provide educators, parents, and other interested parties with a summary of the standard (S) and nonstandard (NS) accommodations for each state assessment included in the SBE-adopted Michigan Educational Assessment System (MEAS). The MEAS includes the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), MI-Access (Michigan's Alternate Assessment Program), and the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA). In addition to the accommodations for the assessments included in the MEAS, the table includes permitted (P) and not permitted (NP) assessment accommodations for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The accommodations available for the spring 2007 administration of the Michigan Merit Examination (MME) are available in a separate table, which is discussed in detail in the article called "IEP Team Decision-Making for the Michigan Merit Examination."

The summary table should not to be used as a checklist for determining what assessment accommodations should be used for a student, but to make sure that appropriate ones are selected and that the consequences of using nonstandard accommodations are considered. The introductory pages of the summary table should be read carefully, as they outline the impact of using standard or nonstandard accommodations on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) calculations and student eligibility for the Michigan Merit Award. The summary table is posted on the MI-Access Web page at www.mi.gov/mi-access under the "Resources" category.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Accommodations

Following are some additional questions that IEP Teams may find useful when deliberating about accommodations. Answering these questions together—as teams are preparing to hold IEPs or following the administration of classroom or statewide assessments—can help ensure that each student is being allowed the best possible access to content that is appropriate for him or her.

- What accommodations are used by the student in the classroom and on assessments?
- What are the results of classroom assignments and assessments when

accommodations are not used?

- What is the student's perception of how well each accommodation "worked?"
- What seem to be effective "combinations" of accommodations?
- What are the difficulties encountered in the use of accommodations for a student?
- What are the perceptions of teachers and others about how the accommodation appears to be "working?"