

The Assist

Helping Students Access and Make Progress in the General Curriculum

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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 and teams making these decisions for Section 504 students 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, the goal of providing them, and recommended questions that IEP and Section 504 Teams should ask during the accommodations selection process. It also provides guidance on how teams might attempt to determine the effectiveness of accommodations for individual students. Much of the information in this article comes from documents prepared by the Council of Chief State School Officers Assessing Special Education Students State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (CCSSO-ASES-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 aloud to a student, need to be provided in one-on-one assessment situations; and (2) assessment accommodations should only be used if the student's IEP or Section 504 plan indicates that they are appropriate for the student, and reflect what he or she 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 help students with disabilities access content, instruction, and assessment. It is important to bear in mind that while accommodations help minimize the effects of a student's disability and gain access to the content and instruction being provided, they do not reduce learning expectations.

There are four general categories into which nearly all accommodations fall:

1. **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.

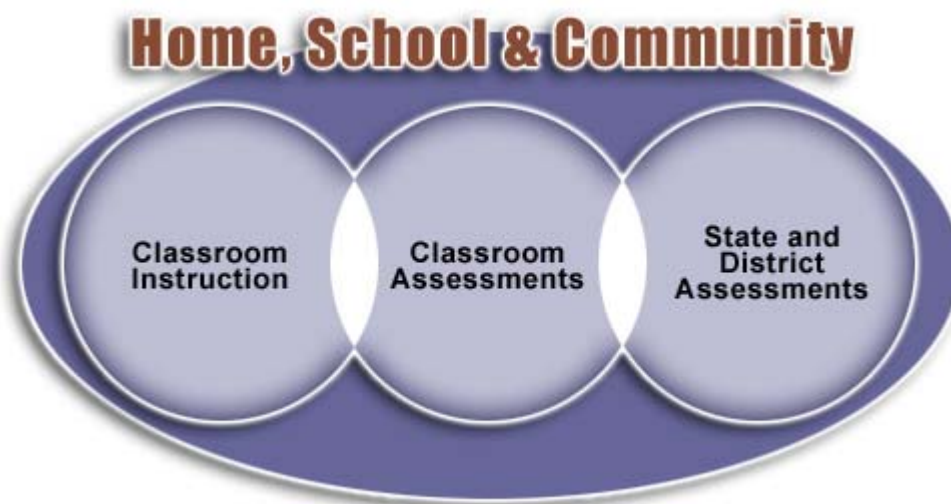
2. **Response accommodations** allow students to complete assignments, assessments, and activities in different ways or to solve or organize problems using some type of assistive device or organizer.
3. **Timing/Scheduling accommodations** increase the time allowed to complete an assessment or assignment and may also change the way the time is organized.
4. **Setting accommodations** change the location in which an assessment or assignment is given or the conditions of the assessment setting.

Michigan used these four categories to develop its *Office of Educational Assessment and Accommodation (OEAA) Assessment Accommodation Summary Table*, and will continue using them to develop other materials related to assessment accommodations.

Modifications are different than accommodations. Instead of providing access to content, instruction, or assessment, modifications actually alter learning or assessment expectations. For example, a modification might require a student to learn less material or revise assessments to make them easier. In Michigan, modifications are considered nonstandard accommodations because they change either the scope or content being measured; therefore, modifications should be considered carefully for use on statewide assessments. If a student uses a modification, or a nonstandard accommodation, on any of Michigan's state-level assessments, he or she will count as not participating in the assessment, which impacts No Child Left Behind (NCLB) participation rates.

Goals of Accommodations Provision

The primary driving force behind accommodations is providing 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 student's disability. To ensure greater access, every IEP and Section 504 Team member must (1) be familiar with the state's content standards and local curricula, and (2) work collaboratively with general and special educators to effectively reach decisions that have the maximum benefit for students. In addition, accommodations must be used consistently and appropriately. As illustrated below, the use of accommodations should not be random, but instead should be linked across instruction and assessment, and 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 *OEEA Assessment Accommodation Summary Table* or employ as many standard accommodations as possible on an assessment hoping that "something" will work. Instead, they should strive to match a student's particular needs with the accommodations that will best help him or her address them. Furthermore, IEP Teams need to know, ahead of time, that there are additional procedures involved with selecting accommodations for certain assessments, such as the Michigan Merit Examination (MME), which means that teams will need to work closely with their district's designated MME Test Accommodations Coordinator (TAC) to make informed decisions.

Following are four lists of questions that IEP Teams may want to use to guide their discussions about selecting accommodations for students with newly identified disabilities or reviewing accommodations for students who are already using them.

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,
 - how willing is the student to learn to use them,
 - what opportunities are available for the student to learn how to use them in classroom settings, and
 - what are 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 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 a part of everyday life and lead to discussions about how they might be used outside of school.

The Assessment Accommodation Summary Table

While the questions listed above should prove useful in guiding discussions about accommodations, it also is helpful to have a list of commonly used accommodations as a reminder of what can be considered for statewide assessment. To that end, Michigan developed its *OEAA Assessment Accommodation Summary Table*, which provides educators, parents, and other interested parties with a summary of the standard and nonstandard accommodations that are available for use on each state-level assessment in the State Board of Education-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). The table also describes permitted and not permitted accommodations for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (The accommodations available for the spring 2007 administration of the Michigan Merit Examination are available in a separate table, which is discussed in detail in the article called "IEP Team and Section 504 Decision-Making for the Michigan Merit Examination.")

IEP Teams need to keep in mind that the OEAA's summary table should not 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 them 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 Michigan Promise. The summary table is posted on the MI-Access Web page at www.mi.gov/mi-access under "Resources" and on the MME Web page at www.mi.gov/mme.

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 greatest 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?”