

Assessment in Special Education

Part 14 – Accommodations in Assessment

Recognizing that disability has its impact, IDEA permits children with disabilities to participate in large-scale assessment programs with accommodations. IDEA requires that students with disabilities take part in state or district wide assessments. These are tests that are periodically given to all students to measure achievement. It is one way that schools determine how well and how much students are learning.

In a Nutshell

To support the participation of children with disabilities in such large-scale testing, accommodations or modifications may be necessary in how the test is administered or how a given child takes the test. **It's the responsibility of the IEP team to decide how the student with a disability will participate, and then to document that decision in the child's IEP.**

Alternatively, the IEP team may decide that a particular test is not appropriate for a child. In this case, the IEP must include:

- an explanation of why that test is not suitable for the child, and
- How the child will be assessed instead (often called alternate assessment).

Let's take a look at both of these scenarios and what type of information is then included in the IEP.

IDEA's Exact Words

What, precisely, is the provision in IDEA related to assessment accommodations? Found at §300.320(a)(6), it states that the IEP must contain:

(6)(I) A statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State and district wide assessments consistent with §612(a)(16) of the Act; and

(ii) If the IEP Team determines that the child must take an alternate assessment instead of a particular regular State or district wide assessment of student achievement, a statement of why—

(A) The child cannot participate in the regular assessment; and

(B) The particular alternate assessment selected is appropriate for the child...

In these words, you can easily see the two scenarios we’re going to discuss now.

1. If the child participates in the assessment, how?
2. If he or she does not participate, why not and what alternate assessment will be used instead?

The Short-ish Story on Assessment Accommodations

Children with disabilities must participate in their state’s grade-level assessments to determine their level of content mastery, just as their peers without disabilities must participate, unless a child’s IEP Team determines that a given assessment is not appropriate for the child. Recognizing that disability has its impact, IDEA permits children with disabilities to participate in large-scale assessment programs with accommodations. Those accommodations are individually determined for a given child by his or her IEP team.

What Kind of Accommodations Are There?

Making an accommodation in testing generally means that some aspect of the testing condition has been altered so that a child with a disability can more fully show what he or she knows or can do.

Accommodations in the classroom and those in assessment situations tend to fall into several types of changes—timing, scheduling, setting, presentation, response. As the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) summarizes in its online *Accommodations Manual* (Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, & Hall, 2005):

- **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 assessments in different ways or to solve or organize problems using some type of assistive device or organizer.
- **Setting Accommodations**—Change the location in which a test or assignment is given or the conditions of the assessment setting.
- **Timing and Scheduling Accommodations**—Increase the allowable length of time to complete an assessment or assignment and perhaps change the way the time is organized. (p. 29)

CCSSO also gives many helpful examples and discusses how these types of accommodations can be used to support both classroom instruction and child assessment (Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, & Hall, 2005, pp. 25-42). The type of accommodation any one child with a disability receives is based on an individual consideration of that child’s needs.

Presentation accommodations:

- Large print
- Magnification devices
- Sign language
- Braille
- Tactile graphics
- Human readers
- Audiotape or CD
- Audio amplification devices

Response accommodations:

- Scribe
- Word processor

- Tape recorder
- Responding in test booklet (not on answer sheet)
- Monitoring of test response, if answer sheet is used
- Calculators
- Spelling and grammar devices

Setting accommodations:

- Reduce distractions to student
- Reduce distractions to other students
- Change setting to permit physical access
- Change setting to permit use of special equipment

Time/Scheduling:

- Extended time
- Multiple or frequent breaks
- Change schedule or order of activities

Assessment accommodations tend to be—and should be—similar to classroom accommodations children with disabilities receive, so that the children are familiar with the accommodation before using it in a formal testing situation. However, IEP teams should not confuse classroom accommodations with assessment accommodations. What is permitted in class may not necessarily be permitted in state or district wide assessments.

Finding out More about Your State's Policies

The best place, of course, to find out more about your State's policies for assessment accommodations—what's allowable, in other words—is your State Department of Education. (Local policies may also be a factor to consider, so the LEA should also be contacted.)

That said, one place you might consult for this information and to gain a sense of what other states are doing as well:

- State Web Sites for Accommodation Information
<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/Accommodations/StatesAccomm.htm>

What about Alternate Assessments?

What happens if an IEP Team determines that it is inappropriate for a specific child with a disability to participate in a state or LEA's large-scale assessment, even with accommodations? Well, alternate assessments happen, and so do statements in the IEP explaining why this is an appropriate approach to use with a given child.

IDEA requires states to develop and implement at least one alternate assessment, unless all children with disabilities in the State can be assessed via the general assessment, with or without accommodations. Alternate assessments may be based on:

- grade-level academic achievement standards,
- modified academic achievement standards, or
- Alternate academic achievement standards. (U.S. Department of Education, 2007)

Assessment in Special Education Series – Part 14

These options are discussed at length below, under “The Long Story.” Here, we’re interested in giving you a broad overview of the possibilities. Keep in mind that a state is not required to make all of these options available to children, so it’s important to know what your state’s policies and options are.

Additional information on alternative assessment is widely available. A few “Starter” resources include:

Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/altAssessTopic.htm>

State Alternate Assessment Policies

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/StatesAltAssess.htm>

Where to Find Out More About Accommodations

Here’s a brief “Starter List” of resources on assessment accommodations that will undoubtedly lead you to yet more resources. Be aware that these may include discussion of classroom assessment accommodations and are often linked to discussion of classroom accommodations in general.

An Introduction to Assessment Accommodations:

http://www.specialconnections.ku.edu/~kucrl/cgi-bin/drupal/?q=assessment/assessment_accommodations

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/TopicAreas/Accommodations/Accomtopic.htm>

Types of Assessment Accommodation

<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/teaching-methods/educational-testing/4170.html>

The Long Story on Assessment Accommodations

More? Oh yes. Namely—more about the assessment options available to children with disabilities that the IEP team will consider.

The 5 Assessment Options

According to the Department of Education (2007), there are five basic assessment options, as follows:

- Participation in a general grade-level assessment.
- Participation in a general grade-level assessment with accommodations.
- Participation in an alternate assessment based on grade-level academic achievement standards.
- Participation in an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards.
- Participation in an alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards. (p. 11)

These options sound uncomfortably alike, don’t they? What, exactly, are “academic achievement standards” and the difference between those that are alternate, modified, or at grade-level?

To start, it’s useful to know that grade-level *assessments* must be closely aligned with grade-level *content* standards. Content standards establish the information or skills that a child in a specific grade is expected

to learn. Grade-level assessments are intended to find out if the child, in fact, has learned that content and to what level of proficiency. Keep this in mind as you read through the options described below.

Options 1 and 2: Participation With or Without Accommodations

You’ve already read about Options 1 and 2, above.

Option 3: Participation in Alternate Assessment Based on Grade-Level Academic Achievement Standards

This type of alternate assessment is intended for children who cannot take the regular assessment, even with accommodations, but for whom the State’s grade-level academic achievement standards are nonetheless still appropriate.

An example of this might be a child who has a severe physical disability that cannot be accommodated in the general assessment without invalidating his or her test scores but who nonetheless is working to achieve the academic standards established for his or her grade level. This type of alternate assessment allows the child’s mastery of grade-level content to still be determined.

Option 4: Participation in Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards

This type of alternate assessment is a new option recently made available to states (April 2007) with the publication of final regulations in NCLB governing its use. States are not required to develop such assessments, but they can if they so choose.

Alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards are intended for a small group of children “whose disability has precluded them from achieving grade-level proficiency and whose progress is such that they will not reach grade-level proficiency in the same time frame as other students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 8). For these children, the general grade-level assessments are too difficult, and the alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards are too easy (they’re meant for children with the most significant cognitive disabilities; Option 5, described below). Either type of assessment will not provide teachers, children, families, and others with accurate information on what a child with a disability knows or can do and, thus, what type of instruction or supports will help the child progress toward grade-level achievement.

The Department of Education (2007) has responded to this gap in assessment options by giving states “the option of developing modified academic achievement standards for a small group of students with disabilities who can make significant progress, but who may not reach grade-level achievement in the time frame covered by their IEP” (p. 20).

Using this approach does not alter the content standards established by a state for a specific grade level. In fact, such an alternate assessment must cover the same grade-level content as the general assessment. However, “the *achievement* expectations are less difficult than those on the general test” (emphasis added), which means that “the same content is covered in the test, but with less difficult questions overall” (p. 28).

Two final points about alternate assessments that are based on modified academic achievement standards.

First: A child may take this type of alternate assessment in one subject (e.g., reading), yet take the general assessment in another subject (e.g., math). Deciding how the child will be assessed in each applicable subject area is the responsibility of the IEP team. However, just as it is the state’s choice to develop (or not) an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards, it also can decide to modify academic achievement standards only for certain grades (e.g., grades 6 through 8, or for

high school) and develop only those alternate assessments corresponding to those modified standards. Similarly, the state can choose to “develop an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards in only one subject (e.g., reading), but not in all subjects (e.g., math, science)” (Ahearn, 2006).

Second: Every year the IEP team must review its decision to assess a child based on modified academic achievement standards. As the Department of Education (2007) states:

We expect that there will be students with disabilities who take an alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards one year, make considerable progress during the school year, and then take the general grade-level assessment the following year. Therefore, an IEP Team must consider a student’s progress annually based on multiple, objective measures of the student’s achievement before determining that the student should be assessed based on modified academic achievement standards. (p. 23)

The option that states now have to develop and implement alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards clearly adds another dimension to how children with disabilities may participate in a state’s assessment programs. However, as has been said, a state is not required to develop such assessments.

For your convenience, here are direct links to the new regulations, the Department’s 51-page guidance for states, and its two-page Fact Sheet on this option to assessment.

Regulations on Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Academic Achievement Standards:
<http://www2.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/finrule/2007-2/040907a.html>

Department’s Non-Regulatory Guidance:
<http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/nclb/twopercent.doc>

Fact Sheet: <http://www.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/twopercent.html>

Option 5: Participation in Alternate Assessment Based on Alternate Academic Achievement Standards

Option 5 sounds almost the same as Option 4, but it isn’t. Fortunately, the difference between *modified* academic achievement standards and alternate ones can be easily described. **Alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards are intended for children with the most significant cognitive disabilities.**

While this type of alternate assessment must be linked to grade-level content, it typically does not *fully* represent grade-level content, only a sampling of it. Moreover, this type of alternate assessment may be linked to “extended content standards” that a state develops, standards that may restrict or simplify grade-level content in order to make it accessible to children with the most significant cognitive disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 18). The state may define these content standards in grade clusters (e.g., grades 3-5). (In contrast, Option 4, alternate assessments based on modified academic achievement standards, must define content standards grade by grade.)

Summing Up the Options

Each of the five options described above represents a way in which children with disabilities may participate in large-scale assessments. Looking at them one by one is useful for grasping what each is about, but when it comes to choosing among them—that is, deciding which represents the appropriate way to assess a specific child with a disability—a comparison of their key elements can be a handy tool.

To that end, the Department of Education provides a chart of comparisons in Appendix 1 of its non-regulatory guidance on alternate assessment based on modified academic achievement standards. This chart is available online at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/nclb/twopercent.doc>

Decisions, Decisions

The IEP team needs to know *which* of these options are available to it (based on state and/or on local policies) and determine which *one* of those is appropriate for the child. How a team determines what's appropriate for the child will vary from state to state based on state policy, which the state must make clear to IEP teams so that they can make informed and appropriate choices.

So what goes in the IEP?

Let's bring the discussion full circle and back to the component of the IEP that this article addresses: any "individual appropriate accommodations" necessary for the child's functional and academic achievement to be measured on a state and district wide assessment. If participating in such an assessment is appropriate for a specific child with a disability, then that child's IEP Team must enumerate in the IEP any individual accommodations the child will need during testing. Some children may need no accommodations. Many *will* need accommodations. It's important for IEP teams to know what type of accommodations can be made without invalidating a child's test scores and which accommodations the state permits.

References

Ahearn, E. (2006). *Standards-based IEPs: Implementation in selected states*. Alexandria, VA: Project Forum, National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). Available online at: <http://projectforum.org/docs/Standards-BasedIEPs-ImplementationinSelectedStates.pdf>

Thompson, S.J., Morse, A.B., Sharpe, M., & Hall, S. (2005, August). *Accommodations manual: How to select, administer, and evaluate use of accommodations for instruction and assessment of students with disabilities* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Available online at: http://www.osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/accommodations_manual.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2007, April). *Modified academic achievement standards* [non-regulatory guidance draft]. Washington, DC: Author. Available online at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/nclb/twopercent.doc>