Accommodations for Instruction and Assessment

New Brunswick / Nouveau Brunswick

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Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Province of New Brunswick
P.O Box 6000
Fredericton, N.B.
E3B 5H1
Canada

Accommodations for Instruction and Assessment

A critical part of teaching and assessing students is providing them with accommodations that support learning and that support their ability to demonstrate their knowledge.

This statement challenges the notion of who benefits from accommodations. The traditional view of accommodations was that they were solely for students on what used to be called Special Education Plans (SEPs) and is now called Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs). The current reality is that accommodations benefit all students, as demonstrated by the increased use of FM systems in classrooms. The issue for educators is to differentiate between accommodations that are based on professional practice and classroom ecology, and accommodations that are prerequisites to learning for students with exceptionalities.

Research by Bolt and Thurlow (2004) suggests that accommodation policies vary, so that approximately two-thirds of exceptional students are afforded accommodations in provincial assessments. The most common accommodations include extended time, alternative setting and/or read-aloud accommodations.

Principles for Accommodation

Every student has the right to expect that:

1. His or her learning outcomes, instruction, assessment and learning environment will be designed to respect his or her needs and strengths.

2. He or she will participate fully in the common learning environment, meaning an environment that is designed for all students, is typical for the student's age and grade and is shared with his or her neighbourhood peers.

3. Systemic and individual accommodations will be considered and implemented as appropriate when evidence demonstrates that the status quo is not in the best interest of the student.. This means provision of programming/learning, assessment and environments that actively respond to the student's needs and are reviewed regularly. It does not mean simply an absence of components of the universal program or the common learning environment.

from the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Definition of Inclusion, 2009

What accommodations are appropriate for which students? How do accommodations affect students' learning and their performance on tests? This document addresses these and other questions and explores the research base in this area.

The Big Picture: Expectations, Content and Testing

Assessment for and of learning are both critically important to ensure that all students are successful. As part of Bill 85: Amendment to the School Districts Regulation – Schools Act (1992), schools are accountable for the education of all students. More than ever before, exceptional students are expected to participate in the prescribed provincial curriculum and provincial assessments to the maximum extent possible.

Two critical elements come together in this new world of accountability. Schools must now carefully consider:

- **what students are expected to know**. There is a greater onus on teachers to follow the prescribed curriculum and outcomes for all subject areas. Now it's important that all students be held to the highest possible academic standards.
- **how well exceptional students are learning.** Including exceptional students with PLPs in provincial assessments is a logical and essential element in improving results for them and the province. Without assessing students, how will we know if they are actually learning what they need to know or what they may still need to master?

In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms speaks of the right for all students to benefit from an education without discrimination. To elaborate:

> *"...equal rights and freedom from discrimination mean not only an expectation to accommodate an individual into an existing process defined by law, but also an expectation to adapt the existing structures so that the service or benefit provided is 'available, accessible, meaningful and rewarding' or the individual..."*

Setting the Direction, 2009

Accommodations can help students successfully meet curricular outcomes and, in turn, demonstrate their learning. As in the Canadian Charter, the New Brunswick Human Rights Act requires the use of accommodations when necessary (Elliott, Kratochwill and Schulte, 1999; McDonnell, McLaughlin and Morison, 1997; Pitoniak and Royer, 2001), and the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has issued guidance in this area. Resources are identified throughout this document, beginning with those in the following Principles for Equity box.

Principles for Equity

The principle of Universal Design for Learning is the starting point for an inclusive public education system. This principle holds that the needs of the greatest number of students be met by maximizing the usability of programs, services, practices and learning environments. When Universal Design for Learning alone is insufficient to meet the needs of an individual student or groups of students, accommodations are required, both ethically and legally.

The New Brunswick public education system will ensure compliance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the New Brunswick Human Rights Act, which require reasonable accommodation of students' special needs unless they demonstrably give rise to undue hardship due to cost, risk to safety, or impact on others. "Provided an appropriate process has been followed and all other options have been eliminated, a potential accommodation of a student may be rejected where it can be proven that it would cause undue hardship as a result of its impact on other students." (New Brunswick Human Rights Commission Guideline on Accommodating Students with a Disability)

from the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Definition of Inclusion, 2009

Deciding which Accommodations a Student Needs

The challenge for educators and families is to decide which accommodations will help students learn new skills and knowledge and which accommodations will help them demonstrate what they have learned (Shriner and DeStefano, 2003). The Online Accommodations Bibliography at the US National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) is an excellent source of information on the range of possible accommodations as well as the effects of various testing accommodations for students with exceptionalities.

The difference between accommodations that are justifiable and those that are "universal" to all students is discussed later in this document. As part of their professional practice and in adherence to the principles of Universal Design for Learning, teachers daily provide accommodation(s) to a full range of students. The guiding questions listed on the following page (Choosing and Using Accommodations: Education Support Services (ESS) Team Considerations) can assist in choosing and using the appropriate accommodations in situations where students require justifiable accommodations.

Choosing and Using Accommodations: ESS Team Considerations

The questions below are designed to serve as a tool to help ESS Teams discuss and determine what accommodations a student needs in the classroom or in assessment. They have been adapted from the US Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities and changed to reflect the Canadian educational context.

- What kinds of instructional strategies (e.g., visual, tactile, auditory, combination) work best for the student?
- What learning strategies will help the student overcome challenges?
- What accommodations increase the student's access to instruction and assessment?
- What accommodations has the student tried in the past?
- What has worked well and in what situations?
- What accommodation(s) does the student prefer?
- Are there ways to improve the student's use of the accommodation?
- Does the student still need the accommodation?
- What are the challenges of providing the student's preferred accommodations and how can these be overcome?
- Are there other accommodations that the student should try?
- Are there ways the student can use preferred accommodations outside the school (e.g., at home, on the job, in the community)?
- Are preferred accommodations allowed on provincial and district assessments?
- How can the student learn to request preferred accommodations (e.g., self-advocacy)?
- Are there opportunities for the student to use preferred accommodations on practice tests?
- What arrangements need to be made to make sure the student's preferred accommodations are available in assessments situations?
- How can the actual use of accommodations be documented?

Education Support Services Team must be involved

The ESS team determines whether a student requires accommodations, and if so, which accommodations are prerequisites for the student to access instruction designed to meet educational standards established by the district and province. Considerations must be given to the specific strengths, challenges, and routines of that student.

When determining accommodations, particular attention should be paid to ensure that the accommodations do not give one student an unfair advantage over another. Care must also be taken not to alter or compromise the test's ability to assess particular knowledge or skills. For example, providing a test in braille to a student with a significant visual impairment would not appear to provide an unfair advantage over a sighted peer participating in a standard administration of the test. Having an adult read aloud questions on a math assessment may not necessarily alter the assessment of math concepts, but having the same adult read aloud on a test of reading comprehension does have the effect of changing the assessment from one of reading comprehension to one of listening comprehension and, in effect, results in the assessment of a different skill altogether.

Conventional wisdom holds that, if students who do not have a disability also make gains when given the same accommodation (e.g., extra time on a test) as students with disabilities, then there are questions about fairness and integrity in the testing situation (Sireci, Li and Scarpati, 2003). As researchers and policy makers continue to wrestle with these complex issues, ESS Teams will need to stay current as policies and recommended practices evolve. It is important to make the distinction between standard accommodations (those that don't alter the nature of what a test is designed to measure) and nonstandard accommodations (those with the potential to significantly change what is being tested) (Thurlow and Wiener, 2000). Accommodations chosen for testing situations can be most effective when they are adopted as an integral part of day-to-day instruction to ensure that students have ample opportunity to practice their use prior to a mandated testing situation.

Students as Self-advocates

Students can help inform accommodation decisions by talking with the ESS team about what works best for them (Thurlow, Thompson, Walz and Shin, 2001). Involving students in the process of determining goals and respecting their voices about which accommodations might best help them achieve those goals recognizes them as valued participants and can ultimately lead to feelings of increased control and responsibility in their education.

The Value of Progress Monitoring

Assessments inform parents, students, school staff, community members and policy makers of just how well students are doing. When appropriately applied, assessment can also help teachers make decisions about what strategies to use to address the needs of their students with disabilities. When teachers use information collected regularly within their own classrooms, they are able to make adjustments to their instruction and help students succeed.

Progress monitoring is a research-based strategy that measures student achievement through the use of targeted instruction and frequent (e.g., weekly, monthly) assessment of academic performance. Based on the information collected, teachers can chart a student's progress toward his or her individual goals and make adjustments when necessary—including adjustments to instructional approaches and to the number and types of accommodations used (Quenemoen, Thurlow, Moen, Thompson and Blount Morse, 2004). Not insignificantly, such regular student assessment also allows teachers to pinpoint when a student is having difficulty.

As shown in the Assessment Accommodations in Action box, assessment strategies in progress monitoring can take many forms, including: curriculum-based measurement (CBM), classroom assessments (system- or teacher-developed), adaptive assessments and large-scale assessments (including province- and district-wide assessments).

Progress monitoring is especially useful with students who have difficulty showing what they know in typical assessments. When the accommodations specified in each student's PLP are consistently provided, progress monitoring allows a real view of what skills and knowledge a student has. School-based ESS Teams and educators can then use the information from these assessments to ensure that students are taught in a way that meets their needs and helps them address their academic goals.

Continual progress monitoring also helps to determine whether a selected accommodation is having the desired effect. Often, accommodations are assigned but not evaluated to determine whether they help the student. As educators, we should keep track of what's helpful and what's not helpful and use that information as the basis for determining whether to use a specific accommodation during an assessment. The National Center on Student Progress Monitoring offers a wide variety of resources to help educators build progress monitoring systems in their classrooms and schools. The Review of Progress Monitoring Tools (http://www.rti4success.org/tools_charts/progress.php), for example, helps teachers make decisions about which assessments to use.

Assessments are evaluated along a number of important dimensions, including:
- reliability and validity
- alternate forms
- sensitivity to student improvement
- improvement of teaching or student learning
- rates of improvement

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Fundamentally, progress monitoring works when teachers use it regularly to reflect on how well instruction is supporting each student's needs. "Progress monitoring in a standards-based system can be the key to unlocking powerful skills and knowledge for teachers and students and can result in success for the school, district and state in an inclusive standards-based assessment and accountability system (Quenemon et al., 2003, p. 16).

Assessment Accommodations in Action

> Case Study
>
> Beth is a conscientious student in Grade 8 with visual-motor coordination difficulties. In the classroom, her disability interferes with her ability to transfer information from the chalkboard or overhead to a paper on her desk. It also is hard for her to copy information from a book to a piece of paper; typically, she loses her place in the book. One of the accommodations that Beth's teacher has found helpful is to let Beth write all answers in her textbook or activity book, rather than on a separate sheet. Her ESS team uses this information when considering possible accommodations for Beth on the upcoming provincial assessment. The team decides there is sufficient evidence that Beth will not be able to track from a test booklet to a test response form.
>
> Because Beth has been successful using the response accommodation of marking in the actual booklet, the team decides this also is an appropriate accommodation for her on the provincial assessment.

Categories of Accommodations (Universal and Justifiable)

There are many ways in which accommodations can be used to support students in the classroom and when they are participating in a district or provincial assessment.

Accommodations Defined

> Universal accommodations are those strategies, technologies or adjustments that enable a student to reach prescribed outcomes and can be used as needed. Universal accommodations do not necessitate a PLP or prior approval for provincial assessments.
>
> Justifiable accommodations are documented strategies, technologies or adjustments without which the student would not be able to access the curriculum. These accommodations are documented within a PLP and require prior approval by the Department of Education & Early Childhood Development to be accessed during provincial assessment.

Universal and justified accommodations can be classified under the following domains:
- presentation
- response
- setting
- timing/scheduling

In the following section, each domain will be defined with specific examples of accommodation type and impact.

Accommodations in presentation affect the way directions and content are delivered to students. Students with visual and hearing impairments, learning disabilities and learning difficulties may require access to content materials in an alternate format. Alternate methods or materials provide these students with equal access to information provided to their peers.

Some examples of accommodations in presentation include:

Presentation Accommodation	Instruction and Assessment
Large print	All parts of the text are in print larger than that typically used (Justified).
Read directions aloud	Items are read to the student (Justified).
Sign interpret directions or questions	Directions or questions are presented to the student via sign language (Justified)

Accommodations in response offer different ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge. They help students with visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities and organizational problems to structure, monitor or directly put words to paper.

Response Accommodation	Instruction and Assessment
Proctor or scribe	The student responds verbally and a proctor or scribe then transcribes for the student. (Justified)
Computer or word processor	The student uses a computer or word processor (e.g., DANA, NEO), but the spellcheck and autocorrect options must be disabled for assessment. (Universal)
Answers written in test booklets (Assessment)	Responses may be written in the test booklet rather than on answer sheets. (Justified)
Communication device	Various devices (e.g., symbol boards) may be provided for the student to use in giving responses. (Justified)
Brailler	The student produces his or her work using braille, which can either be manually transcribed into print or, if electronic, internally translated and a print copy generated for a sighted assessor. (Justified)
Sign responses	Responses may be given by sign language to a sign language interpreter. (Justified)
Speech/text device	The student's verbal responses are transferred to text via a speech/text device (e.g., Dynavox). (Justified)

Accommodations in setting change or alter the environment to facilitate both learning and the demonstration of a student's knowledge. This is especially helpful for students who are easily distracted.

Some examples of accommodations in setting include:

Setting Accommodation	Instruction and Assessment
Individual assessment	The student is assessed separately from other students. (Universal)
Small group	The student is assessed in a small group separate from other students. (Universal)
Carrel	The student is assessed while seated in a study carrel. (Universal)
Separate room	The student is assessed in a separate room. (Universal)
Seat location	The student is assessed in a specifically designated seat location, usually in close proximity to the test administrator. (Universal)
Minimized distractions	The student is assessed in a quiet environment. (Universal)
Medical setting (e.g. hospital, rehabilitation centre)	The student is assessed when out of school for illness or medical conditions. (Special circumstances – professional documentation required)
Increased/decreased opportunity for movement	The student is assessed in an environment that allows for increased or decreased opportunity for movement (e.g., the student may be allowed to walk around). (Universal)

Accommodations in timing or scheduling allow flexibility in the timing of an assessment. Generally, these are chosen for students who may need more time to process information or who need breaks throughout the testing process to regroup and refocus. Timing and scheduling accommodations include:

Timing/Scheduling Accommodation	Instruction and Assessment
Extended time (more than double)	Student may take longer than the time typically allowed. (Justified)
Breaks	Time away from the test is allowed during tests typically administered without breaks, sometimes with conditions about when breaks can occur (e.g., not during subtests) and how long they can be. (Universal)

Accommodations affect test scores for exceptional students, lowering scores in some cases, raising scores in most others (Kettler et al., 2005). Lowered scores appear to result when accommodations are poorly matched to student need or when the student has not had sufficient opportunity to practice using an accommodation in day-to-day settings prior to the testing situation.

The use of read-aloud accommodations on assessments of mathematics for students with low reading skills, and the use of braille for students who are blind or whose sight is impaired were found to be the most effective accommodations in a meta-analytic synthesis by Tindal and Fuchs (2000).

However, because of inconclusive and contradictory findings, it cannot automatically be stated that accommodations provide an accurate picture of a student's ability (Koenig and Bachman, 2004). In addition, it cannot automatically be stated that scores obtained by exceptional students in accommodated situations can always be compared fairly to scores obtained by students who do not have a disability in unaccommodated situations (Koenig and Bachman, 2004).

These last two points in particular make the important task of choosing appropriate accommodations for individual students all the more challenging. Exceptional students bring an extremely broad range of strengths and weaknesses with them to the classroom and testing environments. It is quite possible, in fact, for two students with very similar exceptionalities to require very different accommodations. Teacher training and practical guidance in selecting appropriate accommodations for individual students would clearly go a long way toward improving and informing decision-making (Helwig and Tindal, 2003).

What to do? First, it's good to know that there are readily available tools and resources. Refer to the Choosing and Using Accommodations box in this document for such tools. Second, it's important to receive targeted and sustained professional development to strengthen professional skills and judgment in this area.

We must take care to match student needs with the right accommodations to enable students to show what they know and have learned in the best way possible. Our goal is for teachers to be specific when identifying accommodations and to ensure that they match very closely to the student's disability.

Conclusion

The goal of school is learning. Assessments are just one way—albeit a very important way—to find out whether students have learned. For many students, especially those with disabilities, being able to show they have learned is greatly improved when teachers provide individualized instruction and appropriate accommodations in the classroom and in testing situations.

The sheer variety of accommodations and assessments allows ESS Teams a range of tools by which to understand and maximize student ability. Progress monitoring adds an extra and powerful tool for continually checking on student growth and adjusting instruction to match student needs. Carefully selecting accommodations to address student strengths, challenges and experiences means that students with disabilities have the supports they need to access classroom instruction and then demonstrate what they've learned.

Investigating and providing strategies such as accommodations that support student success can have obviously beneficial results for students. This is reason enough, even if the law did not require it, to provide accommodation strategies. In addition, they can benefit our schools. Schools and educational systems as a whole are accountable for the results they achieve and must demonstrate that their students are learning.

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