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Accommodations and Modifications: Clearing up the Confusion

Garrett Shows, who is featured in the short postsecondary transition film *Garrett Shows: I'm in Charge*, looks through a microscope in science class. "It takes me longer to finish a lesson," he says in the film. "But school gives me more time... as much as I need."

In an ideal world, all instruction would be universally designed: that is, all materials would be available in multiple formats; students would have options for how they work with information and share their understanding; and student engagement would be based on individual interests and talents. Since we don't live in that ideal world, educators must plan for and provide individualized supports related to the content of instruction (what students are taught and expected to learn), instructional methods (how students are taught), the materials used in instruction and assessment, setting (where instruction and assessment take place), time (how long students have to learn or take a test), and technology. Because there are many terms used to describe these supports including "adaptations," "accommodations," and "modifications," and because IDEA doesn't define these terms, educators are often confused about what they mean and the associated implications for grading and graduation requirements. This information brief will clarify the differences between these terms and provide examples of them.

Adaptation is a general term that describes some change in the regular

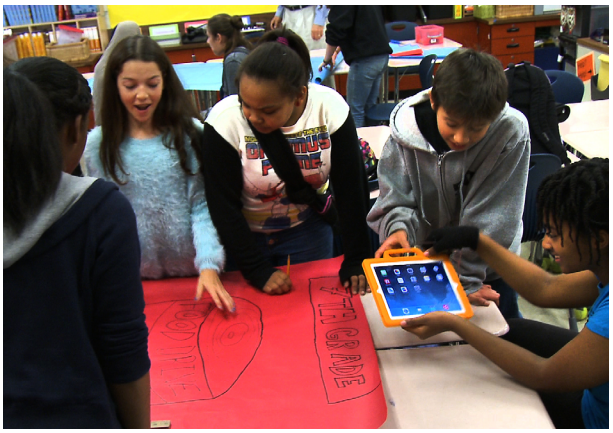
materials, tools, instruction, environment, or assessment provided to students without disabilities, and encompasses both accommodations and modifications. Because different school districts and states use different Individualized Education Program (IEP) forms, these supports may be listed under a category called "Accommodations & Modifications" or another category called "Supplementary Aids and Services."

Accommodations

Accommodations are adaptations that change how a student learns the material or demonstrates her learning. Accommodations do not change the learning objective or standard, so the student with a disability is expected to learn the same information and skills as students without disabilities. In order to ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), all students, with and without disabilities, should have the same instructional access to the general education content. At the same time, some students with disabilities may be expected to learn only part of the content.

Some examples of accommodations are:

- If a student has reading difficulties, she might listen to an audio recording of a text in science or social studies. Using this accommodation ensures that the student is able to acquire the content knowledge in these subjects and not be disadvantaged by her reading skills. Examples of Text to Speech technology include Natural Reader and Kurzweil. Text to Speech software or apps enable students to comprehend at or beyond their independent reading proficiency levels, and with some applications, complete writing assignments and tests more independently.
- Giving students extra time to complete assignments or take tests qualifies as an accommodation, as does allowing a student to take a test in a quiet environment with a familiar adult.



Educators must plan for and provide individualized supports related to the content of instruction, instructional methods, the materials used in instruction and assessment, time, and technology.

- In some cases, shortening an assignment may be an accommodation if completing a shorter assignment will still show that the student has mastered the standard. For example, a student may be assigned five math problems instead of 10 if those five problems address the skills that all students must master. Assigning a student to write five paragraphs instead of five pages might also be considered an accommodation if those five paragraphs contain all of the information that students are required to know.

Modifications

Modifications are adaptations that change what a student is expected to learn and imply a reduction in depth, breadth, or complexity of a learning objective or standard. A modification—to curriculum, instruction, or assessment standards—changes the difficulty of the learning objective. Students whose IEP goals reflect learning objectives below the grade level standards may need modifications in order to be successful in a general education class.

Examples of modifications include:

- Reducing the breadth of information upon which a student is assessed. For instance, typical students in a biology class might

be required to define and label 20 parts of a cell, while a student with a disability who needs modified learning objectives might be asked to define and label five parts of a cell.

- Reducing the complexity level, the student is expected to perform. Using Webb's Depth of Knowledge or Bloom's Taxonomy, most of the students may be assessed at a higher level of rigor (e.g., collecting data and analyzing trends), while some students may be assessed at a lower level (e.g., using already collected data to answer basic "How many?" questions).
- Reducing the depth, breadth, and complexity of information in which a student is instructed and assessed. A typical high school math standard might be: "Explain why the x coordinates of the points where the graphs of the equations $y = f(x)$ and $y = g(x)$ intersect are the solutions of the equation $f(x) = g(x)$; find the solutions approximately, e.g., using technology to graph the functions, make tables of values, or find successive approximations. Include cases where $f(x)$ and/or $g(x)$ are linear, polynomial, rational, absolute value, exponential, and logarithmic functions." In contrast, a modified objective in this same math domain might be: "Interpret the meaning of a point on the graph of a line. For example, on a graph of shirt purchases, trace the graph to a point and calculate the number of shirts purchased, as well as the total cost of the shirts." Although the depth, breadth, and complexity of the learning objective are changed, the essential elements of the standard are maintained.

Regardless of whether students need accommodations or modifications, IDEA specifically states that, "A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general education curriculum."

OTHER EXAMPLES OF ACCOMMODATIONS AND MODIFICATIONS

Accommodations

- Enlarge text or change font.
- Create more white space between letters or words.
- Add pictures/symbols to text when reading is not the skill being tested.
- Change format of tests (e.g., fill-in-the-blank to multiple choice to matching).
- Provide adapted equipment for cooking or art class.
- Allow a student to use her wheelchair to "run" laps in gym.

Modifications

- Adapt text to lower reading level.
- Assign fewer or lower-grade spelling words.
- Simplify diagrams to have fewer parts (e.g., cell, skeleton).
- Work on lower-than-grade-level skills using grade-level math problems (e.g., if the problem is 2x + 7y/43 have the student with the disability add all of the numbers).
- Assign student to learn three facts about a state rather than 20.

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