



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

General Assessments | Accessibility & Accommodations

When should accessibility features and accommodations be used?

In the past, students with disabilities, English learners (ELs), and ELs with disabilities were provided access to participation in general assessments only through the provision of accommodations. An emphasis on [universally designed assessments](#) was initiated as a way to increase the access characteristics of assessments for all students, including students with disabilities, ELs, and ELs with disabilities.

Now, as more states use technology-based assessments, many assessments offer new ways to provide students with access to the content. Often they have levels of accessibility features that include:

- Universal features such as zoom and highlighting that are either embedded in the assessment and are immediately available for all students, or are non-embedded and provided via a human and available for all students.
- Designated features such as embedded text to speech for some content or a picture dictionary or non-embedded features such as read aloud or bilingual dictionaries are available to any student, if needed. These features must be identified before testing so that they can be available to the student.
- Accommodations, either embedded or non-embedded, are available only to students with documented disabilities or ELs. These changes in testing materials or procedures allow students to show their knowledge and skills. An example of a possible accommodation for a student with reading difficulties is the use of text-to-speech during a math assessment. An example of a possible accommodation for an EL with a hearing impairment who does not use American Sign Language is a human sign language interpreter. Most often, these accommodations are routinely provided during classroom instruction. They should not be introduced for the first time during an assessment. Decisions about assessment accommodations should be based on what students need to have an equal opportunity to show what they know without impediment of their disabilities or English proficiency.

These new approaches to accessibility allow for more accurate measurement of the student's knowledge and skills and are an important part of technology-based and paper-pencil testing.

Who makes decisions about designated accessibility features and accommodations?

Accommodations decisions need to be made by people who know the educational needs of the student. Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams must make decisions for students with disabilities. The IEP team should include the student and a parent, along with general education teachers. If unable to attend the IEP team meeting, these individuals should provide input on accommodations decisions. For ELs with disabilities, the IEP team also should include an educator who is familiar with the student's linguistic and cultural background as well as the process of language acquisition.

In some schools and districts there may be language development teams to make decisions for ELs who do not have disabilities.

What is the difference between an accommodation and a modification?

An **accommodation** refers to a change in testing materials or procedures that does not change what is being measured. A **modification** refers to a change that is thought to change what is being measured.

What do federal laws say about providing accommodations?

Several federal laws have provisions for requiring the use of accommodations for students with disabilities.

The regulations for the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** of 1997 and 2004 address several key points:

1. [34 CFR § 300.320\(a\)\(6\)\(i\)](#) of the regulations implementing Part B of the Act requires that the IEP state "any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State and districtwide assessments."
2. [34 CFR § 300.160\(b\)\(1\)](#) of the regulations requires states to develop accommodations guidelines for state and district assessments.
3. [34 CFR § 300.160\(b\)\(2\)\(i\)](#) of the regulations requires that the guidelines developed by states identify only those accommodations that do not invalidate scores.
4. [34 CFR § 300.160\(b\)\(2\)\(ii\)](#) of the regulations requires IEP teams to select only accommodations that do not invalidate scores.
5. [34 CFR § 300.160\(f\)\(1\)](#) of the regulations requires states to report the number of students with disabilities who participated in statewide assessments using accommodations.

The 2015 reauthorization of the **Elementary and Secondary Education Act** (ESEA) known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) also addresses accommodations ([PDF document](#)). It requires states to:

1. Develop and disseminate information on, and promote the use of appropriate accommodations.
2. Offer accommodations for ELs.
3. Ensure that regular and special education teachers and other staff know how to administer assessment, including making appropriate accommodations.
4. Report on the number and percentage of students with disabilities taking regular assessments with accommodations.

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** of 1990 addresses accommodations by requiring that facilities be free of barriers and accessible to persons with disabilities. It was amended in 2008 to provide broader protections for workers with disabilities.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 does not directly mention accommodations for elementary and secondary school students. However, the regulations and interpretation of this law have indicated that reasonable accommodations should be provided to students with disabilities.

What are some tools that can help with accommodations decisions?

The [NCEO Accommodations Bibliography](#) allows users to search a compilation of empirical research studies on the effects of various testing accommodations for students with disabilities.

[**Improving Accommodations Outcomes: Monitoring Instructional and Assessment Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**](#) is a tool that describes a 5-step process states, districts, and schools can use to improve the monitoring of accommodations. These materials were created through a collaborative effort between NCEO and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

Three CCSSO Accommodations Manuals for [Students with Disabilities](#), [ELs](#), and [ELs with disabilities](#) provide customizable formats for states to use in developing their own materials on the accommodations decision-making process.

Also, NCEO developed online training on accommodations decision making. The training contains five interactive, multi-media professional development modules, and includes case-based video clips. Educators are coached on best practices in how to select, administer, and evaluate the use of accommodations. See [Online Training to Improve Accommodations Decision Making](#), which is available without charge.

Is there research on assessment accommodations for special populations?

The existing accommodations research addresses either students with disabilities or ELs. ELs with disabilities may be included in such studies, but the studies often do not report findings for them. Educators should make accommodations decisions for ELs with



disabilities using the best knowledge available. Ideally, this knowledge should relate to the unique learning and assessment needs of ELs with disabilities. Until there is more research explicitly with this group of students, the best knowledge we have comes from combining what we know about accommodations for ELs and for students with disabilities. The field also needs research examining the effect of accommodations on language proficiency test scores.

The [NCEO Accommodations Bibliography](#) provides information about many of the accommodations research studies that pertain to students with disabilities.

Why are some accommodations that were used for instruction not allowed for use during assessment?

Some instructional accommodations may alter what a test is designed to measure. When this is the case, state accommodations policies may not permit the use of those accommodations for the assessment.

How can a teacher request an accommodation that is not listed in the state assessment policy?

Some students may have needs that require them to use an accommodation that is not on a state's accommodations policy list. Most states' accommodations policies include a process that an IEP team or EL decision maker can use to request an accommodation not on the state's list.