



## How To: Use Accommodations With General-Education Students: Teacher Guidelines

Classrooms in most schools look pretty much alike, with students sitting at rows of desks attending (more or less) to teacher instruction. But a teacher facing any class knows that behind that group of attentive student faces lies a kaleidoscope of differences in academic, social, self-management, and language skills. For example, recent national test results indicate that well over half of elementary and middle-school students have not yet attained proficiency in mathematics (NAEP, 20011a) or reading (NAEP 2011b). Furthermore, 1 in 10 students now attending American schools is an English Language Learner (Institute of Education Sciences, 2012) who must grapple with the complexities of language acquisition in addition to the demands of academic coursework.

Teachers can increase the chances for academic success by weaving into their instructional routine an appropriate array of classwide curricular accommodations made available to any general-education student who needs them (Kern, Bambara, & Fogg, 2002). However, teachers also know that they must strike an appropriate balance: while accommodations have the potential to help struggling learners to more fully engage in demanding academics, they should not compromise learning by holding a general-education student who accesses them to a lesser performance standard than the rest of the class. After all, students with academic deficits must actually *accelerate* learning to close the skill-gap with peers, so allowing them to do less is simply not a realistic option.

Read on for guidelines on how to select classroom accommodations to promote school success, verify whether a student actually *needs* a particular accommodation, and judge when accommodations should be used in instruction even if not allowed on state tests.

**Identifying Appropriate Accommodations: Access vs. Target Skills.** As an aid in determining whether a particular accommodation both supports individual student differences and sustains a demanding academic environment, teachers should distinguish between *target* and *access* skills (Tindal, Daesik, & Ketterlin, 2008). *Target skills* are those academic skills that the teacher is actively trying to assess or to teach. Target skills are therefore 'non-negotiable'; the teacher must ensure that these skills are not compromised in the instruction or assessment of any general-education student. For example, a 4th-grade teacher sets as a target skill for his class the development of computational fluency in basic multiplication facts. To work toward this goal, the teacher has his class complete a worksheet of 20 computation problems under timed conditions. This teacher would not allow a typical student who struggles with computation to do fewer than the assigned 20 problems, as this change would undermine the target skill of computational fluency that is the purpose of the assignment.

In contrast, *access skills* are those needed for the student to take part in a class assessment or instructional activity but are not themselves the target of current assessment or instruction. Access skills, therefore, *can* be the focus of accommodations, as altering them may remove a barrier to student participation but will not compromise the academic rigor of classroom activities. For example, a 7th-grade teacher assigns a 5-paragraph essay as an in-class writing assignment. She notes that one student finds the access skill of handwriting to be difficult and aversive, so she instead allows that student the accommodation of writing his essay on a classroom desktop computer. While the access skill (method of text production) is altered, the teacher preserves the integrity of those elements of the assignment that directly address the target skill (i.e., the student must still produce a full 5-paragraph essay).

**Matching Accommodations to Students: Look for the 'Differential Boost'.** The first principle in using accommodations in general-education classrooms, then, is that they should address access rather than target



academic skills. However, teachers may also wish to identify whether an individual actually benefits from a particular accommodation strategy. A useful tool to investigate this question is the 'differential boost' test (Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). The teacher examines a student's performance both with and without the accommodation and asks these 2 questions: (1) Does the student perform significantly better *with* the accommodation than without?, and (2) Does the accommodation boost that particular student's performance substantially *beyond* what could be expected if it were given to all students in the class? If the answer to both questions is YES, there is clear evidence that this student receives a 'differential boost' from the accommodation and that this benefit can be explained as a unique rather than universal response. With such evidence in hand, the teacher should feel confident that the accommodation is an appropriate match for the student. (Of course, if a teacher observes that most or all of a class seems to benefit from a particular accommodation idea, the best course is probably to revise the assignment or assessment activity to incorporate the accommodation!)

For example, a teacher may routinely allocate 20 minutes for her class to complete an in-class writing assignment and finds that all but one of her students are able to complete the assignment adequately within that time. She therefore allows this one student 10 minutes of additional time for the assignment and discovers that his work is markedly better with this accommodation. The evidence shows that, in contrast to peers, the student gains a clear 'differential boost' from the accommodation of extended time because (1) his writing product is substantially improved when using it, while (2) few if any other students appear to need it.

**Classroom Accommodations and State Tests: To Allow or Not to Allow?** Teachers may sometimes be reluctant to allow a student to access classroom accommodations if the student cannot use those same accommodations on high-stakes state assessments (Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). This view is understandable; teachers do not want students to become dependent on accommodations only to have those accommodations yanked away at precisely the moment when the student needs them most. While the teacher must be the ultimate judge, however, there are 3 good reasons to consider allowing a general-education student to access accommodations in the classroom that will be off-limits during state testing.

1. *Accommodations can uncover 'academic blockers.'* The teacher who is able to identify which student access skills may require instructional accommodations is also in a good position to provide interventions proactively to strengthen those deficient access skills. For example, an instructor might note that a student does poorly on math word problems because that student has limited reading decoding skills. While the teacher may match the student to a peer who reads the word problems aloud (texts read) as a classroom accommodation, the teacher and school can also focus on improving that student's decoding skills so that she can complete similar math problems independently when taking the next state examinations.
2. *Accommodations can promote content knowledge.* Students who receive in-class accommodations are likely to increase their skills and knowledge in the course or subject content substantially beyond the level to be expected without such supports. It stands to reason that individuals whose academic skills have been strengthened through the right mix of classroom accommodations will come to the state tests with greater mastery of the content on which they are to be tested.
3. *Accommodations can build self-confidence.* When students receive classroom accommodations, they are empowered to better understand their unique pattern of learning strengths and weaknesses and the strategies that work best for them. Self-knowledge can build self-confidence. And not only are such students primed to advocate for their own educational needs; they are also well-placed to develop compensatory strategies to manage difficult, high-stakes academic situations where support is minimal--such as on state tests.



## References

Institute of Education Sciences. (2012). *English Language Learners in public schools (indicator 8)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved on January 24, 2013, from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_ell.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ell.asp)

Kern, L., Bambara, L., & Fogt, J. (2002). Class-wide curricular modifications to improve the behavior of students with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 27, 317-326.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2011a). *The nation's report card: Mathematics 2011*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2011/2012458.asp>

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). (2011b). *The nation's report card: Reading 2011*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2011/2012457.asp>

Tindal, G., Daesik, L., & Ketterlin, L. (2008). *The reliability of teacher decision-making in recommending accommodations for large-scale tests: Technical report # 08-01*. Eugene, OR: Behavioral Research and Teaching, University of Oregon.

Tindal, G., & Fuchs, L. (1999). *A summary of research on test changes: An empirical basis for defining accommodations*. Lexington, KY: Mid-South Regional Resource Center, University of Kentucky. Retrieved on January 25, 2013, from <http://www.specialed.us/discoveridea/topdocs/msrrc/Tindal%26Fuchs.PDF>

# Classroom Friendly Accommodations to Motivate Reluctant Learners

**Provide a skills checklist.** For complex academic tasks requiring several cognitive steps to complete, provide the student with a checklist that lists each step and instructions for completing it. Before the activity, the student can be prompted to preview the checklist; after the activity, the student uses the same checklist to review the work (Alter, Wyrick, Brown, & Lingo, 2008).

**Choose assignment.** Give the student a choice between two or more assignment options that are equivalent in the 'target academic skills' required--e.g., allowing the student to format a summary of the causes of the American War of Independence as a research paper or PowerPoint presentation (Kern & State, 2009).

**Select a work partner.** Allow the student the option to select one or more individuals to collaborate with--e.g., classmate, older peer, adult mentor--when completing an assignment (Kern & State, 2009).

**Choose where to work.** Give the student the option of completing the assignment in one of several acceptable locations--e.g., at desk, at corner table, in the school library (Kern & State, 2009).

**Decide when to work.** Permit the student to turn in the assignment at one of several acceptable times--e.g., immediately, tomorrow, end of the week (Kern & State, 2009).

**Choose mode of completion.** Give options for the means that the student will use to complete the assignment--e.g., writing an essay by hand or typing it on a computer (Kern & State, 2009).

**Shorten task length.** Reduce the length of time the student is to be engaged in the task--e.g., shortening the time of an independent writing assignment from 20 minutes to 15 minutes (Conroy & Stichter, 2003).

**Allow choice in task sequence.** When there are several tasks to complete in one session, allow the student to complete the tasks in the order of their choosing (Conroy & Stichter, 2003).

**Intersperse easy items on assignments.** When creating worksheets, intermix easy with challenging items (Kern & Clemens, 2007). For example, a teacher who wants to motivate a student to complete a multiplication math worksheet might intersperse one easy problem (1 digit x 1 digit) after every challenging problem (3 digit x 2 digit).

**Increase compliance through high-probability requests.** Use 'behavioral momentum' to increase compliance by first directing the student or class to complete several short, simple, high-preference directives (e.g., "Take out a sheet of paper", "write your name on the paper", "copy the assignment from the board") before presenting the student or class with a low-preference directive (e.g., "Open your books and begin the assignment") (Kern & Clemens, 2007).

## References

- Alter, P. J., Wyrick, A., Brown, E. T., & Lingo, A. (2008). Improving mathematics problem solving skills for students with challenging behavior. *Beyond Behavior*, 17(3), 2-7.
- Conroy, M. A., & Stichter, J. P. (2003). The application of antecedents in the functional assessment process: Existing research, issues, and recommendations. *The Journal of Special Education*, 37(1), 15-25.
- Kern, L. & Clemens, N. H. (2007). Antecedent strategies to promote appropriate classroom behavior. *Psychology in the Schools*, 44(1), 65-75.
- Kern, L., & State, T. M. (2009). Incorporating choice and preferred activities into classwide instruction. *Beyond Behavior*, 18 (2), 3-11.