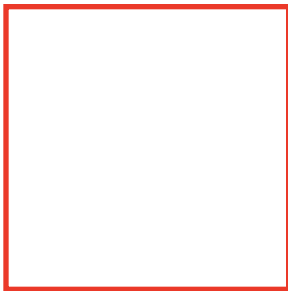


EPRRI Issue Brief Seven

How Students Access Accommodations in Assessment and Instruction: Results of a Survey of Special Education Teachers



*By Sheryl S. Lazarus, Sandra J. Thompson,
and Martha L. Thurlow*

*National Center on Educational Outcomes,
Institute on Community Integration,
University of Minnesota*



The Institute for the Study of
Exceptional Children and Youth
University of Maryland
1308 Benjamin Building
College Park, Maryland 20742-1161

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Issue Brief Highlights

Historically many students with disabilities did not participate in accountability systems. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires that students in all targeted subgroups, including students with disabilities, have the opportunity to learn challenging material that is linked to content standards and to participate in statewide assessments. Some students with disabilities need to use accommodations to meaningfully access instruction and assessment, but little is known about how teachers choose and use accommodations for students with disabilities.

This Issue Brief reports the results of a survey of 798 special education teachers in six school districts in four states about the use of student accommodations. The survey was conducted to provide researchers and policymakers with a better understanding of: 1) Which factors influence IEP team decisions about how accommodations are used for instruction and assessment; 2) Which accommodations are most commonly used in instruction and assessment; and 3) The processes used to ensure that assessment accommodations are provided on test day.

From this survey, we learned that—

- Only 29 percent of the special education teachers indicated that state policies and guidelines were an important consideration when IEP teams made decisions about assessment accommodations.
- The most commonly provided assessment accommodations were extended/extra time, small group/individual administration, test items read aloud, and test directions read aloud.
- Many teachers did not understand the implications of accommodations decisions (e.g., that the students' scores may count in a different way or be invalidated).
- Test day did not always run smoothly and students did not always receive needed assessment accommodations.

The results of this study suggest that there is a need for both State Education Agencies and local school districts to develop and provide materials and professional development that will help teachers learn how to make effective use of accommodations.

Introduction

The Educational Policy Reform Research Institute (EPRRI), funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education, conducts policy research that analyzes how students with disabilities can be included in accountability systems. One of its research activities is to identify emerging issues. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all students to participate in state assessment systems. Some students with disabilities are able to participate in the regular statewide assessments under standard conditions, but many access these assessments by using accommodations.

NCLB requires the participation of all students in statewide assessments, including students with disabilities. In addition, at least 95 percent of all students and each subgroup in each grade level must take the statewide test to avoid schools' automatic classification as not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals. Many states, school districts, and teachers have grappled with how to include students with disabilities in statewide testing. NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) also mandate that the performance of students with disabilities be publicly reported; yet the reports vary greatly across states (Thompson, Thurlow, & Lazarus, 2001; Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003). State participation and accommodation policies that determine how students participate in statewide assessments are very different between states as well. In many states, the policies and guidelines have been frequently revised as states have tried to more appropriately make decisions

about the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems (Clapper, Blount, Lazarus, Thompson, & Thurlow, 2005; Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Robey, 2002).

There are two major types of accommodations: Assessment accommodations and instructional accommodations. *Assessment accommodations* can be defined as changes in testing materials or procedures that enable a student with disabilities to meaningfully participate in a large-scale assessment. *Instructional accommodations* are changes and supports that enable students with disabilities to meaningfully access the curriculum during instruction. Assessment accommodations and instructional accommodations are closely linked. Often students require a particular accommodation for both instruction and assessment, though some instructional accommodations may not be appropriate for use during assessment (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003; Elliott, Braden, & White, 2001). This Issue Brief analyzes how assessment and instructional accommodations are selected and used for students with disabilities.

Teachers use a variety of strategies when they make decisions about instructional and assessment accommodations for students with disabilities. According to DeStefano and Shriner (2000), for accommodations to be effectively implemented for instruction and assessment, a major transformation is needed in the way that teachers and other Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members understand accountability, the relationship between instruction and assessment, and the role of IEPs.

The Rhode Island Department of Education (2002) analyzed how assessment accommodations were used by students with disabilities by surveying teachers, analyzing IEPs, and observing students on test day. The study found that assessment accommodation recommendations in student IEPs were based on individual student needs, but that often individual “distinctions among observed students would disappear during testing sessions” (p. 3). The study also found that accommodation choices sometimes seemed to meet institutional needs more than student needs. For example, if one student in a room needed to have the assessment directions read aloud, every student in that room would receive that accommodation whether or not it was needed. Also, all students in a given location often tended to receive the same “bundle” of accommodations whether or not a particular accommodation was contained in any given student’s IEP.

The purpose of this Issue Brief is to present the results of a survey of special education teachers from EPRRI’s eight participating school districts. The survey was conducted to provide researchers and policymakers with a better understanding of —

- Which factors influence IEP team decisions about how accommodations are used for instruction and assessment.
- Which accommodations are most commonly used in instruction and assessment.
- The processes used to ensure that assessment accommodations are provided on test day.

Method

EPRRI conducts intensive field-based research in the four core study states of California, Maryland, New York, and Texas. Within each of these states, two districts were selected to participate in this survey. The districts represented urban, suburban, and rural settings. In October 2003, EPRRI convened a policy symposium about how schools make decisions about the use of accommodations for instruction and assessment. At that symposium, the EPRRI core study districts were invited to participate in an upcoming study of how IEP teams make decisions about the use of accommodations for instruction and assessment. Six of the eight EPRRI districts chose to participate in the study. At the EPRRI symposium, the district representatives were asked to complete a form estimating the number of surveys needed to give one to every special education teacher in their district who had had at least one student with disabilities participating in a statewide assessment within the past year. Two-thousand six-hundred five (2,605) surveys were requested.

A questionnaire was designed to explore teacher knowledge about accommodations, current accommodation practices, and how accommodation decisions were made and implemented in practice. The questionnaire contained nine questions. With the exception of the last question, the survey asked respondents to select a response from a list which best represented their answer to the question. The last item was open-ended and asked teachers to add comments about the strengths or limitations of their schools’ process for determining, providing, and reporting

accommodations. Several of the questions were based on those used in the Rhode Island Department of Education (2002) study described above in order to see whether the results of that study could be extended to other states.

EPRRI researchers mailed the requested number of surveys, along with stamped and addressed return envelopes, to the Director of Special Education or other designated contact person in each participating district. It was suggested that the surveys be completed by special education teachers during a staff workshop or meeting; however, each district could decide how to distribute the surveys to its teachers.

Teachers individually completed and returned the surveys to the authors. All responses were anonymous. The special education teachers in the participating districts completed the surveys between November 2003 and February 2004. Surveys were received from 804 special education teachers. The respondents on six returned surveys wrote that they were unable to answer the questions either because they were new teachers or because they had no students participating in statewide assessments during the past year. The results of 798 surveys were summarized and analyzed.

Even though the requested number of surveys was sent to each district, EPRRI researchers were later contacted by several of the districts and asked what to do with the extra surveys they did not use. Although an accurate count of the number of non-used surveys was not obtained, it is estimated that about 30 percent of the number originally sent were not used. With this estimate factored in, the return rate was 44 percent.

Results

As shown in Table 1, slightly more than half of the special education teachers who completed the survey were elementary teachers. About 22 percent of the respondents were middle school teachers, about 20 percent were high school teachers, and about 4 percent taught at multiple levels.

Table 1. Percentage of Special Education Teachers Who Work at Various School Levels

School Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Elementary	426	53.4%
Middle school	179	22.4%
High school	164	20.6%
Multi-level	29	3.6%
Total	798	100.0%

How Do IEP Teams Make Decisions About Instructional Accommodations?

Special education teachers were asked how IEP teams at their schools determine a student's need for instructional accommodations. Respondents were asked to select the three most important factors that affected their decisions. As shown in Table 2, 56 percent of the respondents indicated that one of the top considerations was to *create the highest possible level of independence for the student*. This factor was the most frequently cited by teachers at elementary, middle, and high school levels. It was the second most frequently cited criterion for teachers who taught at multiple levels.

Multi-level teachers considered *what will enable the student to have access to the general curriculum* most frequently when determining a student's need for instructional accommodations. This

Table 2. Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Said Selected Criteria Were Used by IEP Teams in Their School to Determine Students' Need for Instructional Accommodations

Criteria Used	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
How to create the highest possible level of independence for the student	56.1%	56.8%	57.5%	55.5%	44.8%
What will enable the student to have access to the general curriculum	47.0%	50.2%	44.7%	39.6%	51.7%
Teacher input	38.7%	37.8%	44.1%	36.6%	34.5%
The student's learning style	35.4%	42.7%	26.8%	26.8%	31.0%
The student's disability classification	19.7%	18.5%	19.0%	25.0%	13.8%
Placement/program	19.5%	20.7%	20.7%	17.1%	10.3%
Accommodations previously documented on IEP	18.6%	16.4%	21.8%	20.1%	24.1%
Based upon the targeted skills being taught	17.0%	18.3%	14.5%	15.2%	17.2%
Parent input	10.8%	9.2%	11.2%	13.4%	17.2%
What will enable the student to succeed as an adult	9.2%	4.2%	11.7%	19.5%	10.3%
School and staff resources	6.4%	5.9%	5.6%	6.7%	13.8%
Feasibility of providing the accommodation	5.6%	5.6%	6.7%	3.7%	10.3%
Percent of time student spends in general education settings	5.1%	4.9%	4.5%	6.7%	0.0%
Student input	2.9%	0.0%	3.9%	9.1%	3.4%
Student proficiency in English	1.2%	1.2%	1.7%	1.2%	0.0%
Student age	0.5%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other: Frequent responses: Individual students needs, team input, past performance	6.1%	5.4%	4.5%	8.5%	13.8%

factor was the second most frequently cited factor at all other grade levels. More than 30 percent of special education teachers indicated that *teacher input* and the *student's learning style* were important considerations. Other frequently mentioned criteria included the *student's disability classification*, *program or placement of the student*, *accommodations previously documented on IEP*, and *targeted skills were being taught*.

The question about instructional accommodations also asked whether the teacher considered *student input* to be an important factor when IEP teams at his or her school make decisions about instructional accommodations. No elementary teachers considered *student input*, while about 9 percent of high school teachers considered it to be important. Elementary teachers – and many secondary teachers – apparently assumed that the

IEP team does not need student input, even though students – at all grade levels – may be able to provide unique insights into how accommodations can be effectively used.

How Do IEP Teams Make Decisions About Assessment Accommodations?

Special education teachers were asked to select the top three factors that IEP teams at their schools use to determine a student’s need for accommodations on state assessments. As shown in Table 3, almost

Table 3. Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Said Selected Criteria Were Used by IEP Teams in Their School to Determine Students’ Need for Accommodations on State Assessments

Criteria Used	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
The student’s abilities	59.5%	62.0%	62.0%	54.3%	41.4%
Accommodations that a student uses for instruction	56.9%	62.0%	55.9%	43.9%	62.1%
State policies and guidelines	29.2%	28.6%	25.7%	33.5%	37.9%
Teacher input	23.8%	25.1%	26.3%	20.1%	13.8%
Assessment accommodations previously documented on a student’s IEP	23.1%	22.8%	24.6%	23.2%	20.7%
Student performance on other tests	21.9%	17.6%	26.8%	30.5%	10.3%
How to create the highest possible level of independence for the student	21.3%	23.0%	19.6%	15.9%	37.9%
Based upon the targeted skills being assessed	16.1%	15.7%	15.6%	18.3%	13.8%
The student’s disability classification	12.1%	11.0%	8.9%	17.7%	17.2%
Placement/program	11.0%	9.4%	13.4%	13.4%	6.9%
Percent of time student spends in general education settings	4.7%	2.8%	6.1%	9.1%	0.0%
Feasibility of providing the accommodation	3.6%	3.3%	2.8%	4.9%	3.4%
Parent input	3.1%	1.9%	5.6%	3.0%	6.9%
School and staff resources	2.4%	2.3%	2.8%	1.8%	3.4%
Student proficiency in English	1.5%	1.9%	0.0%	1.8%	3.4%
Student input	1.0%	0.0%	0.6%	3.7%	3.4%
Student age	0.9%	1.4%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%
Other: Frequent responses: Individual students needs, team input, classroom accommodations, whatever is needed	3.7%	4.5%	1.1%	3.0%	13.8%

60 percent of the teachers said that the *student's abilities* were an important consideration. Over half of the respondents (57%) reported that the *accommodations that a student uses for instruction* was an important factor realizing that there was a link between instructional accommodations and assessment accommodations.

Nearly 30 percent of the teachers indicated that *state policies and guidelines* were among their three most important considerations. Other considerations selected by more than 20 percent of special education teachers included *teacher input*, *assessment accommodations previously documented on a student's IEP*, *student performance on other tests*, and *how to create the highest level of independence for the student*.

Interestingly, 5 percent of high school teachers considered *the feasibility of providing the accommodation* to be an important consideration when making assessment accommodation decisions. High school and middle school teachers were also more likely to consider a student's *program or placement* when making accommodation decisions than teachers at the other grade levels.

Commonly Used Assessment Accommodations

The special education teachers who participated in the survey were asked to mark all assessment accommodations that were commonly used by their students. As shown in Table 4, almost 73 percent of all responding teachers provided students with *extended/extra time*, while more than 60 percent provided *small group/individual administration* accommodations.

More than 57 percent of the teachers indicated

that *test items read aloud* was a commonly provided accommodation, while 56 percent indicated that *test directions read aloud* was a commonly provided accommodation. Both of the read aloud accommodations were more frequently provided at the elementary level than at the high school level.

Almost 59 percent of the multi-level teachers frequently provided *alternate setting* accommodations. Other accommodations commonly provided by more than 20 percent of the teachers included *directions clarified*, *preferential seating*, *breaks as needed*, and *flexible scheduling*. Elementary teachers seldom provided *calculators* as an accommodation, whereas one-third of the middle school teachers, 40 percent of the high school teachers, and almost 45 percent of the multi-level teachers provided the calculator accommodation.

Do Teachers Know the Implications of Accommodation Decisions?

Some accommodations may change what is being tested to the extent that it invalidates a student's score. This type of accommodation is referred to differently in the policies of each state. In California, for example, educators were using the term *modification* while in Maryland these accommodations were referred to as *accommodations that invalidate the results of the score*. In New York, these accommodations were called *accommodations that change the construct of the test and yield inaccurate scores* while in Texas educators were using the term *non-allowable accommodation*. In this particular survey, the special education teachers were asked to select from a list of accommodations the ones that were considered

Table 4. Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Indicated That They Frequently Used Selected Assessment Accommodations

Accommodation	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
Extended/extra time	72.6%	69.5%	72.6%	79.9%	79.3%
Small group/individual administration	61.7%	67.8%	54.7%	54.9%	62.1%
Test items read aloud	57.7%	64.6%	57.0%	43.3%	48.3%
Directions read aloud	56.4%	62.9%	55.9%	39.6%	62.1%
Alternate setting	42.3%	39.2%	44.7%	45.1%	58.6%
Directions clarified	41.8%	45.8%	41.3%	33.5%	34.5%
Preferential seating	35.8%	32.2%	41.3%	39.0%	41.4%
Breaks as needed	34.7%	39.0%	30.7%	26.2%	44.8%
Flexible scheduling	21.9%	23.2%	25.1%	14.6%	24.1%
Calculator	19.8%	4.9%	33.0%	40.2%	44.8%
Assistive technology	16.8%	13.8%	17.3%	20.1%	41.4%
Write in test booklet	16.3%	10.1%	24.6%	23.8%	17.2%
Scribe	9.6%	9.9%	7.3%	8.5%	27.6%
Large print	9.2%	6.3%	10.1%	15.9%	10.3%
Visual cues on test	6.5%	6.8%	5.0%	7.9%	3.4%
Sign Language	5.5%	6.1%	3.4%	4.3%	17.2%
Spellchecker or dictionary	5.0%	2.1%	9.5%	5.5%	17.2%
Noise buffer	3.1%	3.3%	3.4%	3.0%	0.0%
Tape recorder	2.1%	0.9%	1.1%	4.3%	13.8%
Braille	1.9%	1.4%	1.7%	1.8%	10.3%
Templates/graph paper	1.5%	0.5%	2.8%	1.8%	6.9%
Translation	1.1%	0.9%	2.2%	0.0%	3.4%
Other ___(Frequent responses: Hard copy of notes, number line, multiplication table, shortened test)	9.7%	11.5%	8.9%	8.5%	0.0%

Table 5. Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Identified Selected Accommodations as Being Invalid or Nonstandard Accommodations on One or More State Assessments

Accommodation	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
Read aloud	36.7%	35.9%	41.3%	29.9%	55.2%
Spellchecker or dictionary	31.0%	34.5%	22.3%	31.1%	27.6%
Calculator	30.0%	27.7%	36.9%	28.7%	24.1%
Visual cues on test	19.5%	20.2%	21.8%	17.1%	10.3%
Extended/extra time	17.2%	17.4%	24.6%	10.4%	6.9%
Flexible scheduling	13.3%	13.4%	19.0%	8.5%	3.4%
Translation	8.7%	9.4%	7.3%	9.8%	3.4%
Scribe	8.5%	11.0%	6.1%	3.7%	10.3%
Tape recorder	8.0%	6.8%	7.8%	12.2%	0.0%
Assistive technology	6.9%	6.8%	6.7%	6.7%	10.3%
Breaks as needed	6.5%	7.5%	7.3%	3.7%	3.4%
Templates/graph paper	5.5%	5.4%	3.9%	8.5%	0.0%
Sign language	3.1%	3.5%	3.9%	1.2%	3.4%
Write in test booklet	3.0%	2.1%	2.2%	4.9%	10.3%
Braille	2.4%	3.1%	2.2%	1.2%	0.0%
Don't know	24.9%	25.6%	21.8%	30.5%	10.3%
Other: Frequent responses: Providing answers, shortening the test, administration over multiple days, multiplication tables, reduced number of possible answers	8.0%	11.3%	5.6%	3.7%	0.0%

invalid or nonstandard on at least one of their state assessments. For the remainder of this paper the term *nonstandard accommodation* will be used to describe this group of accommodations.

As presented in Table 5, about 25 percent of the teachers indicated that they did not know which accommodations were considered nonstandard in their state accommodation policy. About one-third of the teachers stated that *read aloud*, *spell checker or dictionary*, and *calculators* were nonstandard accommodations in their state.

To better analyze whether the survey respondents knew which accommodations were considered nonstandard in their state, each teacher's response was compared to the accommodations policy of his or her respective state. Table 6 lists whether selected accommodations were considered standard or nonstandard in each of the four EPRRI states (e.g., California, Maryland, New York, and Texas) in 2003.

Table 6. Documentation of Whether Selected Accommodations Were Considered Standard or Nonstandard on One or More State Assessments (California, Maryland, New York, and Texas), 2003.

Criteria	California	Maryland	New York	Texas
Read aloud	Nonstandard Accommodation ¹	Nonstandard Accommodation ²	Nonstandard Accommodation ³	Nonstandard Accommodation ³
Spellchecker or dictionary	Nonstandard Accommodation	Not listed in state policy	Standard Accommodation	Not listed in state policy
Calculator	Nonstandard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Nonstandard Accommodation	Prohibited
Visual cues on test	Not listed in state policy	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Extended/extra time	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Not listed in state policy
Flexible scheduling	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Translation	Not listed in state policy	Not listed in state policy	Not listed in state policy	Prohibited
Scribe	Nonstandard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Tape recorder	Not listed in state policy	Not listed in state policy	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Assistive technology	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Breaks as needed	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Templates/graph paper	Not listed in state policy	Not listed in state policy	Standard Accommodation	Not listed in state policy
Sign language	Nonstandard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Nonstandard Accommodation ³
Write in test booklet	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation
Braille	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation	Standard Accommodation

Source: Compiled using data from Clapper, Morse, Lazarus, Thompson, and Thurlow (2005).

¹Allowed on non-reading ELA test; Allowed with implications for scoring and/or aggregation on the CAT-6 reading test and CST ELA test.

²Implications for scoring and/or aggregation on the 3rd and 4th grade reading MSA.

³Not allowed for reading or writing tests.

Table 7 shows the percentage of the survey respondents who were unable to accurately identify whether an accommodation was standard or nonstandard in their respective state. To construct this table, each individual’s response was compared to the policy in effect in his or her respective state. For example, in all four EPRRI states *read aloud questions* was considered a nonstandard accommodation at some grade levels or on some statewide tests, so the “correct” response would be nonstandard. However, some accommodations were considered standard in some states and nonstandard in others. An example of this situation would be the *scribe* accommodation, which was considered a standard

accommodation in Maryland, New York, and Texas--and a nonstandard in California. Therefore, the appropriate answer for a teacher in Maryland, New York, or Texas for the *scribe* accommodation was standard, but the appropriate response for a California teacher was nonstandard. If the accommodations policy for a state did not indicate whether a particular accommodation was standard or nonstandard, or if a given accommodation was explicitly prohibited in a state, teachers’ responses in that state were not included in the calculation of the percentage of “appropriate” responses.

Many of the survey respondents were unable to appropriately identify whether some of the accommodations generally considered to be

Table 7. Percentage of Respondents Who Were Unable to Appropriately Identify Whether an Accommodation was Considered Standard or Nonstandard in Their Respective State

Criteria	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
Read aloud	63.3%	64.1%	58.7%	69.9%	44.8%
Spellchecker or dictionary	66.1%	66.5%	35.3%	56.4%	66.7%
Calculator	62.5%	65.4%	46.2%	38.3%	52.6%
Visual cues on test	23.3%	23.8%	28.4%	18.5%	15.0%
Extended/extra time	33.0%	32.7%	46.2%	23.9%	5.3%
Flexible scheduling	13.4%	13.4%	19.0%	8.6%	3.4%
Scribe	32.6%	33.6%	33.5%	26.4%	41.4%
Tape recorder	8.0%	5.8%	10.8%	11.1%	0.0%
Assistive technology	24.0%	31.2%	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%
Breaks as needed	6.5%	7.5%	7.3%	3.7%	3.4%
Sign language	62.3%	59.9%	65.9%	59.7%	58.6%
Write in test booklet	3.0%	2.1%	2.2%	4.9%	10.3%
Braille	19.0%	34.3%	2.2%	1.2%	0.0%

more controversial were considered standard or nonstandard accommodations in their state. [See Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, & Blount (2004) for more information about which accommodations are considered controversial]. For example, as indicated in Table 7, 63 percent of all survey respondents were unable to appropriately identify whether the *read aloud* accommodation was a standard or nonstandard accommodation in their respective state; 66 percent could not appropriately identify the *spellchecker* accommodation; 62 percent could not appropriately identify the *calculator* accommodation, and 33 percent were unable to appropriately identify the *scribe* accommodation.

It must be noted that the question about standard and nonstandard accommodations may have been unclear to some survey respondents. Accommodations policies have been changing from year to year in many of the four states. The survey was designed to ask teachers about what occurred during the most recent administration of the statewide test, and the accommodations policy that was in effect at that time; however, the question did not explicitly indicate the year. Also, much depends upon the grade level and content area being assessed. For example, if an accommodation was considered nonstandard on the 3rd grade statewide test in a state but a standard accommodation on the high school assessment in the same state, a high school teacher might not know (and would not be expected to know) that the accommodation was considered nonstandard

on the large-scale test administered to elementary students.

In spite of possible misinterpretation of the question about standard and nonstandard accommodations by some teachers, many special education teachers apparently had little knowledge about which accommodations were classified as nonstandard in their state. For example, as indicated in Table 7, one-third of the respondents did not know whether the extended/extra time accommodation was considered standard or nonstandard in their respective state. Most teachers, however, were able to classify accommodations that are generally considered non-controversial (such as breaks as needed and templates/graph paper) as standard accommodations.

The survey respondents were also asked to select the response that best described what happened to the scores of students who used nonstandard accommodations. As shown in Table 8, almost 34 percent of all respondents did not know what happened to those scores. High school instructors had the highest rate of uncertainty at 44 percent. It is, however, difficult to draw conclusions about the results presented in Table 8 because state policies varied across states. For example, Texas policies indicated that students who needed any nonstandard accommodations should participate in alternate assessments at their school, while New York policies indicated that students were not permitted to use any nonstandard accommodations at all on state assessments. In California, the scores of students who used any nonstandard accommodations were reported to schools and parents, but not included in the accountability system. Analysis of the data for individual districts

Table 8. Percentage of Survey Respondents who Selected Various Responses About What Happens to the Scores of Students who Used Nonstandard Accommodations

Response	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
I don't know.	33.9%	29.6%	33.5%	43.9%	37.9%
Students who need any nonstandard accommodations participate in alternate assessments.	14.8%	14.6%	13.4%	18.3%	10.3%
Students are not allowed nonstandard accommodations on state assessments.	14.3%	19.2%	11.2%	6.1%	10.3%
Scores of students who use any nonstandard accommodations are reported to schools and parents, but are not included in the accountability system.	11.0%	12.7%	10.1%	7.9%	10.3%
All scores count for accountability, no matter what accommodations the student uses.	9.2%	6.8%	15.1%	9.8%	6.9%
Students who need any nonstandard accommodations do not take the general state assessments.	2.9%	2.8%	2.2%	3.7%	3.4%
Students who use any of nonstandard accommodations receive a score of zero or are given the lowest score.	2.7%	3.1%	2.8%	0.6%	10.3%
Scores of students who use any nonstandard accommodations are included in public reports, but are not included in the accountability system.	2.0%	2.1%	3.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Scores of students who use any nonstandard are filed away and not used at all.	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%
Other: Frequent responses: Varies, reported in different ways for different tests	2.7%	2.3%	2.2%	4.9%	0.0%

Table 9. Percentage of Survey Respondents who Indicated That Selected Procedures and Processes Were Used for Students Needing Accommodations on the Day that State Assessments Were Administered in Their School

Procedures and Process Used on Test Day	All Districts	School Level			
		Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Multi-level
The student's special education teacher administers the test and provides the accommodations documented on the student's IEP.	63.8%	66.0%	62.0%	61.6%	58.6%
The proctor/test administrator has written documentation of student accommodation needs and the accommodations are provided.	54.4%	59.6%	48.0%	45.1%	69.0%
Prior to the test date, the student's special education teacher discusses the accommodations with the proctor/test administrator and the accommodations are provided.	50.4%	58.5%	44.1%	37.8%	48.3%
A special test booklet (e.g., large print) is ordered in advance and is provided to the student on test day.	35.4%	32.9%	40.2%	39.0%	24.1%
Special equipment (e.g., computer, tape recorder) is prepared in advance and provided to the student on test day.	32.9%	28.2%	38.5%	36.0%	51.7%
Actual accommodations used are recorded on the test booklet or other forms.	23.7%	26.1%	20.1%	21.3%	27.6%
A database is used to keep track of individual accommodations.	21.2%	18.8%	24.0%	25.6%	20.7%
The student's special education teacher administers the test and provides the accommodations he/she thinks the student needs.	7.5%	6.8%	7.8%	9.1%	6.9%
If at least one student in the testing room needs a specific accommodation (e.g., directions read aloud), the accommodation is provided for all students in the room.	2.9%	1.9%	5.0%	3.7%	0.0%
The proctor/test administrator provides the accommodations he/she thinks the student needs.	2.0%	1.9%	2.2%	2.4%	0.0%
Staff availability determines which accommodations are provided.	1.9%	1.9%	1.1%	3.0%	0.0%
The student explains to the proctor/test administrator what accommodations he/she needs and the accommodations are provided.	1.6%	0.9%	1.7%	3.7%	0.0%
Accommodations that do not require a special test booklet may not be provided.	0.6%	0.5%	0.6%	1.2%	0.0%
Other: Frequent responses: Don't know, students grouped by accommodations required	3.6%	3.5%	2.2%	6.1%	0.0%

suggested that the survey responses had little correlation with state policies; however, the data in this report were not disaggregated by state or district to eliminate any potential disclosure issues.

What Happens on Test Day?

The teachers were asked to imagine a scenario where *“today is state assessment day in your school and a student who needs specific assessment accommodations arrives in the testing room.”*

The survey respondents were then asked to select the responses from a list that described what was most likely to happen in their school. Respondents were permitted to mark all responses that applied. As shown in Table 9, many of the respondents indicated that things went smoothly on test day. Almost 64 percent of the respondents indicated that *the student’s special education teacher administers the test and provides the accommodations documented on the student’s IEP*. Fifty-four percent selected *the proctor/test administrator has written documentation of student accommodation needs and the accommodations are provided* and fifty percent of the teachers indicated that *prior to the test date, the student’s special education teacher discusses the accommodations with the proctor/test administrator and the accommodation is provided*.

However, in some cases test day did not run as smoothly. Almost 3 percent of all respondents (and 5 percent of the middle school teachers) indicated that if at least one student in the testing room needs a specific accommodation (e.g., directions read aloud), the accommodation is provided for all students in the room. The bundling of accommodations may have been easier from a school’s perspective, but indicated

that individual student needs may not have been a priority. Two percent of the respondents indicated that the proctor/test administrator provides the accommodations he or she thinks the student needs. In our study, the results from the question about accommodations on state assessment day differed from the results of the study conducted by the Rhode Island Department of Education (2002) that was discussed earlier in this Issue Brief. As noted previously, researchers in that study actually observed what happened on test day and found that “schools tended to bundle accommodations for groups of students during the assessments, rather than strictly following individual IEP recommendations, seemingly in an effort to cover all bases for as many students as possible” (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2003). A limitation of our study was that observations were not conducted on test days, but rather teachers were asked to report what happened. Perhaps teachers who participated in the study did an excellent job of providing students with the accommodations they needed on test day; however, another interpretation of the results would be that some of the survey respondents reported what they believed we wanted to hear and what they thought would make their district “look good,” rather than reporting what actually happened on test day.

Does the Process for Determining, Providing, and Reporting Accommodations Differ Between School Districts?

Some school districts may have provided teachers with more training about the appropriate use of accommodations for instruction and assessment than other districts. Also, some districts may have

Table 10. Comparison of How Frequently IEP Teams in Different School Districts Used Selected Criteria to Determine Students’ Need for Accommodations on State Assessments

Criteria Used	All Districts	Range	
		Minimum	Maximum
The student’s abilities	59.5%	41.2%	66.7%
Accommodations that a student uses for instruction	56.9%	33.3%	84.3%
State policies and guidelines	29.2%	20.9%	55.6%
Teacher input	23.8%	3.9%	33.3%
Assessment accommodations previously documented on a student’s IEP	23.1%	16.7%	45.1%
Student performance on other tests	21.9%	0.0%	33.5%
How to create the highest possible level of independence for the student	21.3%	5.6%	29.4%
Based upon the targeted skills being assessed	16.1%	11.1%	22.2%
The student’s disability classification	12.1%	8.1%	22.2%
Placement/program	11.0%	2.0%	16.7%
Percent of time student spends in general education settings	4.7%	0.0%	6.7%
Feasibility of providing the accommodation	3.6%	1.5%	16.7%
Parent input	3.1%	0.0%	7.0%
School and staff resources	2.4%	0.0%	5.9%
Student proficiency in English	1.5%	0.0%	2.2%
Student input	1.0%	0.0%	5.6%
Student age	0.9%	0.0%	2.0%

provided resources and other supports (e.g., smaller class sizes, more paraprofessional assistance, small rooms that could be used for small group test administration) that implicitly enabled teachers to make different decisions about the use of accommodations from those made by teachers in other districts that haven’t provided similar resources and supports.

This study compared how the process for determining, providing, and reporting accommodations differed among school districts. The response patterns for many of the questions differed greatly across districts. Table 10 presents an example of how response patterns differed for

one representative question. The table compares how frequently IEP teams in different school districts used selected criteria to determine students’ need for accommodations on state assessments. Almost 57 percent of the survey respondents (as shown previously in Table 3) indicated that the *accommodations that a student used for instruction* was considered when determining a student’s need for accommodations on state assessments. However, as presented in Table 10, 84 percent of the teachers in one of the districts considered it to be an important factor while only 33 percent of the teachers in another district (in a different state) considered it important.

Twenty-two percent of the survey respondents indicated that a *student's performance on previous tests* was one of the most important factors that IEP teams in their school considered when making decisions about a student's need for accommodations on state assessments. However, as shown in Table 10, no teachers in one of the six surveyed districts and 33% of the teachers in another district considered a student's performance on previous tests to be important.

What do Teachers Say About Their School's Process for Determining, Providing and Reporting Accommodations?

The special education teachers who participated in the accommodations survey were given the opportunity to add comments about the strengths or limitations of their schools' process for determining, providing, and reporting accommodations for students. Comments were written by 117 of the 798 survey participants. In table 11, we categorized the comments into several general overarching themes. At least five percent of the respondents who added comments expressed one of the nine general themes discussed below, while two individual responses were reported under a separate *non-theme* category.

- **Theme 1. School is doing a good job of providing appropriate accommodations.**

Thirty-four survey respondents (e.g., 29 percent of the participants who wrote comments) added comments that indicated their school was doing a good job of providing appropriate accommodations. One respondent said, "Our school is wonderful at organizing the specific needs for testing our special ed populations

in advance." Another wrote, "I feel our school district/department does an excellent job determining, providing and reporting accommodations for our students."

- **Theme 2. Lack of resources (e.g., financial, facilities, personnel).** Twelve percent of the teachers who added comments to the survey indicated that they were concerned about the lack of resources in their district. Some mentioned the lack of sufficient funding, while others mentioned the need for additional teachers, space, or other resources. For example, one teacher wrote, "A larger classroom to give accommodations is needed." Another wrote, "It's difficult to provide fully individualized accommodations because we have to test in large groups."
- **Theme 3. Process falls apart on test day.** Almost 8 percent of the teachers who added comments expressed a concern that the advance plans that were made for test day were not actually carried out. One teacher noted, "Most of the time teachers do not follow the accommodations provided on the IEPs of the students." Another commented, "Since a large number of administrators are used, special ed teachers do not always know where each child is on test day."
- **Theme 4. Need for better records or database.** Almost 7 percent of the special education teachers who added comments indicated a need for better records or databases. For example, one teacher wrote, "We need a database to keep track of individual accommodations." Another indicated, "Sometimes accommodations don't get on the IEP documents when they should."

Table 11. Summary of Comments of Survey Respondents About the Strengths or Limitations in the Their Schools' Process for Determining, Providing, and Reporting Accommodations

Theme	No. of Comments	% of Comments	Representative Comments
School is doing a good job of providing appropriate accommodations	34	29.1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My school works very hard to provide necessary accommodations. • The staff, including those providing accommodations, has been better prepared than in the past. Also materials and supplies have been better organized and dispensed than in the past. • The hardest thing is getting the general ed teachers to understand that the accommodations are mandatory and not a "suggestion." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our school is wonderful at organizing the specific needs for testing our special ed population in advance. • I feel our school district/ department does an excellent job determining, providing and reporting accommodations for our students. • Our district is extraordinary in the services provided. • Providing accommodations for special needs students is <u>not</u> considered optional by my district.
Lack of resources (financial, facilities, and personnel)	14	12.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the diversity and volume of student need and the increasing limitations of staff resources, it's difficult to provide fully individualized accommodations because we have to test in large groups. • Wish we could get the legislators to fund us! • Lack of funding; Not enough adults to aid in test administration. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A larger classroom to give accommodations is needed. • There are too many special ed students in the general ed classroom for one teacher (or two) to provide all necessary accommodations. • There seems to not be enough manpower to get everything done because there are so many kids who need accommodations.
Process falls apart on test day	9	7.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hardest accommodation is the small group setting. The physical lack of faculty and testing space makes it difficult to fulfill. • For state tests, accommodations are always given in the classroom. Many times general ed teachers take it upon themselves to decide if the students get their accommodations when the special ed teacher is working in another room. • Most of the time teachers do not follow the accommodations provided on the IEP's of the students. • When my students are tested it is with an adult they do not know and in an unfamiliar environment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since a large number of administrators are used, special ed teachers do not always know where each child is on test day. • There seems to not be enough manpower to get everything done because there are so many kids who need accommodations. • Students were scattered since testing was determined by specific period of the day. • The proper way to implement an accommodation is not explained to the proctors. Proctors may provide different techniques for the same accommodation.

Theme	No. of Comments	% of Comments	Representative Comments	
Need for better records/database.	8	6.8%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We need a database to keep track of individual accommodations. • Accurate data needs to be used to group students by accommodations on test day. • Data stored is not available to staff members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school has had unclear and conflicting documentation of student accommodations. • Sometimes accommodations don't get on the IEP documents when they should—There is confusion about how to [complete the forms].
Accommodations should be permitted to "level the playing field."	7	6.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It becomes very frustrating when students with disabilities in a given area are not allowed accommodations that will level the playing field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The limitations put on what accommodations are allowed is an outrage. Accommodations were meant to level the playing field. Unfortunately certain ones have been eliminated.
Changes and inconsistencies in the law make it difficult to understand how to appropriately use accommodations	7	6.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The biggest difficulty has been in keeping up to date with the constant changes as the state continues to tweak and change the system. • Counting "read aloud" and "calculators" go against the Federal definition of 'modification'. On IEP these are 'accommodations'. • Accommodations seem arbitrary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because of changes in procedures or laws regarding modifications and accommodations of standardized tests, there is an uncertainty of what is considered to be a modification and/or accommodation. • On-level students are allowed calculators, but resource math kids are not It doesn't make sense to me.
Need for more training and staff development	7	6.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very little training for new staff. • After reading through [this survey] as lead teacher in spec. ed. I realize the spec. ed. department needs a review on accommodations/modifications with a check sheet referral and our new teachers obviously did not receive sufficient instruction in accommodations/mods even though the IEPs are written correctly. • I feel that I could use further training in this area. • I feel a little unsure as our state tests are new. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This district needs to provide staff development and require the training in the use and implementation of accommodations and modifications for all teachers of students with disabilities. • Department chair needs to notify all the special ed. teachers in advance what [accommodations] are available and what [accommodations] are within the state guidelines.

Theme	No. of Comments	% of Comments	Representative Comments	
Have little personal experience with the state test and accommodations (new teacher, teaches students with severe cognitive disabilities, etc.)	7	6.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a new staff member I needed to speak with a co-worker that has been in the district for several years to complete this survey. • Most of my students take [an alternate assessment]. I teach life skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My answers may not be reliable for your study because my students are significantly below average and participate in a functional curriculum.
Administrators and others not directly involved in the instructional process make decisions about the use of accommodations	6	5.1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have been told by our administration that our “special education numbers are too high” and that one (non-reading) student could not have his state assessment read to him for math. • I am deeply concerned that decisions about accommodations are being made by people who are not at the instructional point and have never met the child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes people outside the IEP team (administrators) make recommendations based on previous test scores. • Still general restraints from Sp. Ed. Director re. use of assistive technologies and/or other accommodations instead of training personnel for case by case determination.
Advanced planning is important	5	4.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing what the students’ needs are in advance and accommodating for those needs are critical to student success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We try to check on every student’s needs prior to testing for verification and set up.
The use of nonstandard accommodations should not impact the way a student’s score is reported/ aggregated	5	4.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fact that any modifications, which are legal provided they are in the IEP, makes the students’ scores to be counted as Far Below Basic is immoral and should be illegal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations that invalidate the use of the test score for the student’s benefit is a real backwards way of helping a special ed student. • Any modification means that he’s branded as performing below on all parts of the test.
Relationship between accountability systems and the IEP.	5	4.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even if a student’s IEP requires questions read, it can’t be done on a state test. • The school cannot choose an appropriate test according to the student’s achievement level, i.e., all students take grade level tests regardless of IEP and instruction received except most severe students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel test accommodations should be given for every student with the accommodations on their IEP.

Theme	No. of Comments	% of Comments	Representative Comments
General statements about No Child Left Behind or testing.	2	1.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is too much testing! • No Child Left Behind—how can this new directive work for students with extreme needs?
Other miscellaneous comments	10	8.5%	<p>We as teachers need to instill more student advocacy.</p> <p>I am a teacher for the visually impaired . . . Limitations are the omissions of the pictures.</p>
Total number of respondents who wrote additional comments	117		

There is confusion about how to [complete the forms].”

- **Theme 5. Accommodations should be permitted to “level the playing field.”** Six percent of the teachers who wrote comments were frustrated when limitations were placed on the use of accommodations. One teacher noted, “It becomes very frustrating when students with disabilities in a given area are not allowed accommodations that will level the playing field.”
- **Theme 6. Changes and inconsistencies in the law that make it difficult to know how to appropriately use accommodations.** Six percent of the respondents who wrote comments found it difficult to understand accommodations laws and policies. One teacher wrote, “The biggest difficulty has been in keeping up to date with the constant changes as the state continues to tweak and change the system.” Another teacher reported an apparent

inconsistency in the accommodation policy of his or her respective state regarding the use of calculators writing that, “On-level students are allowed calculators, but resource math kids are not It doesn’t make sense to me.”

- **Theme 7. Need for more training and staff development.** As shown in Table 11, 6 percent of the teachers who added comments were concerned about the lack of training for both themselves and for new teachers. One respondent commented, “I feel that I could use further training in this area.” Another teacher indicated that there was “very little training for new staff.” The teachers also wished that school district administrators would provide them with information about state policies. For example, a teacher wrote, “[The] department chair needs to notify all the special ed teachers in advance what [accommodations] are available and what are within the state guidelines.”

- **Theme 8. Have little personal experience with the state test and the use of accommodations.**

Six percent of the teachers who added comments noted that they knew relatively little about accommodations because they were new teachers or because they taught students with severe cognitive disabilities. One teacher wrote, “As a new staff member I needed to speak with a co-worker that has been in the district for several years to complete this survey.”

- **Theme 9. Administrators and others not directly involved in the instructional process make decisions about the use of accommodations.** As presented in Table 11, more than 5 percent of the special education teachers who wrote comments noted that individuals who were not directly involved with the students were the ones actually making accommodation decisions. A teacher expressed concern that “sometimes people outside the IEP team (administrators) make recommendations based on previous test scores.” Another teacher wrote, “I have been told by our administration that our ‘special education numbers are too high’ and that one (non-reading) student could not have his state assessment read to him for math.”

- **The “non-theme.”** Only 2 of the survey respondents wrote general comments indicating that they were opposed to the inclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems or that they disagreed with the assessment of students with disabilities. One individual wrote, “There is too much testing,” while the other reported, “No Child Left Behind—how can this new directive work

for students with extreme needs?” These two comments represent only 1.7 percent of the 117 respondents who added comments to the survey or 0.2 percent of the 798 special education teachers who completed the survey. Most teachers who added comments either indicated that their schools were successfully providing students with disabilities with accommodations that the students needed or they indicated that there were some specific issues that needed to be addressed to improve the provision of accommodations.

Discussion

There was wide variation between schools in the factors that IEP teams considered when making accommodation decisions. For example, almost 57 percent of the special education teachers who participated in this study indicated that one of the key criteria considered by the IEP team in the determination of assessment accommodations for a student was *the accommodations that the student uses for instruction*. According to Thurlow, Elliott, and Ysseldyke (2003), this is a sound criterion for IEP teams to consider, and students need to learn how to use an accommodation appropriately in advance, rather than having the accommodation suddenly thrown at them on test day. For example, if a student has not used a spellchecker during instruction, he or she may not know how to use the accommodation when provided with it during a testing situation. In an analysis of state accommodation policies, Thurlow, Lazarus, Thompson, and Morse (2004) found that 28 states required students to have used accommodations for instruction before allowing the accommodation to be used for assessment. Yet, in one of the districts included in this study, only 33 percent of the teachers indicated that the *accommodations a student uses for instruction* was among the most important factors to consider when making assessment accommodation decisions.

The survey results indicated that accommodation decisions made by IEP teams were often not linked to state accommodation policies. Only 29 percent of the special education teachers who responded to the survey indicated that *state policies and guidelines* were one of the

key factors considered when making assessment accommodation decisions. Most teachers did not know which accommodations were considered nonstandard accommodations in their state and many had little understanding of how the use of nonstandard accommodations may have impacted the manner in which a student's scores were reported or included in the accountability system. Teachers may need training and professional development to keep up-to-date on policies and to learn how to appropriately use accommodations for instruction and assessment.

According to Thompson, Lazarus, and Clapper (2005), "States and school districts across the United States have found widespread consensus on the need for accommodations, but have also often found it very difficult to put the beliefs into practice". The results of this study indicated that many special education teachers have gaps in their knowledge about how to effectively use accommodations for students with disabilities where some others had relatively little knowledge about how to appropriately use accommodations for either instruction or assessment. There was also great variability reported between teachers and school districts in how and when accommodations were provided.

The results of this study showed that much needs to be done by State Education Agencies (SEAs) and school districts to ensure that: (1) Teachers understand how to make effective decisions about the use of accommodations, and (2) Assessment accommodations are provided on test day. Here are several suggestions for states and school districts to consider —

State Education Agencies

- Develop clear guidelines and policies related to accommodations.
- Create high-quality web pages that provide easy to understand information about accommodations.
- Produce materials about accommodations to use for training.
- Provide training for school district staff on the provision of accommodations. Targeted training should be provided for: (1) Directors of special education, (2) School district curriculum specialists, (3) Special education teachers, (4) General education teachers, (5) School administrators, and (6) Para-educators.
- Develop teacher training program standards that indicate what entry-level special education and general education teachers need to know about accommodations.

School districts (Local Education Agencies)

- Create a culture that values the achievement of *all* students.
- Encourage both the director of special education and district curriculum specialists to develop expertise in how to use accommodations for instruction and assessment.
- Provide training for school district staff on the provision of accommodations. Targeted training should be provided for: (1) special education teachers, (2) general education teachers, (3) school administrators, and (4) para-educators.

- Develop record-keeping systems and databases that track accommodations.
- Provide sufficient resources.

In this study we explored what special education teachers know and understand about the accommodations that can be used for instruction and assessment and about the decision process for accommodation use. The study was conducted between November 2003 and February 2004 in six school districts located in four states. It is important to continue to monitor and track these findings over time and in other states and districts. SEAs may find it useful to conduct similar surveys and use the survey results to identify training and professional development needs of educators in their state.

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