

Instructional Guidance

Providing Greater Access for Students with Special Needs

This document is intended for those teachers, both in general and special education, who provide instruction based on Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards to students with ranging abilities.

Accessibility

All Arizona students, including those with special needs, must have meaningful access to grade level content as defined by Arizona's College and Career Ready standards. For access to be meaningful, the student must understand and engage with instruction, materials, and tasks to build the necessary knowledge and skills needed at each grade level. Over successive years a firm foundation is established and built upon, resulting in college or career readiness upon graduation.

Planning from the perspective of accessibility affords students with special needs broader choices and more independent access than accommodations alone.

The provision of accommodations has been relied upon to meet accessibility needs for students with disabilities. In May, 2015, Arizona's general education and special

education teachers were surveyed to determine the types and frequency of instructional accommodations used in classrooms across Arizona. Results from more than 1,000 teachers indicated that students are most often being afforded accommodations involving adjustments in time and settings, with instruction in small groups ~~or 1:1~~ as common practice. While additional time and specialized seating may be helpful for individuals, these types of accommodations do nothing to provide access to grade level content. When a student can't effectively decode text, what alternative access can be provided? When the process of encoding is slow and laborious, what alternatives can be offered as a means to demonstrate what they know and can do with grade level content? The broader concept of accessibility can be addressed with methods that are beneficial to all students, and in turn may minimize the need for additional accommodations.

Such accessibility considerations for assessment are evident in the many tools and features now offered to all students taking AzMERIT online. It is because of these changes that the list of allowed accommodations is noticeably fewer and more tailored to individual needs, such as hearing and vision impairments.

These same shifts, when employed in instruction, broaden the scope of options available to meet a range of needs and lessen the necessity for retrofitting and re-teaching lessons. Shifts in instructional approaches begin with the consideration of options available for presentation, response, and engagement, followed by the provision of any individualized instructional accommodations to ensure access. For instruction, the choice of access options and accommodations provided to students should

Choice translates to greater engagement and in students “taking charge” of their learning.

not be limited to those provisions allowed in assessment – instructional design, emerging technologies, and innovative programs offer a wealth of creative opportunities to engage and excite students about their learning.

Rationale

Two important pieces of legislation – the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) – detail the guidelines for how schools will be held accountable for educating students with disabilities.

The ESEA, now reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act, sets the expectation that schools are accountable for the educational achievements of all students, and that to meet this expectation of accountability, all students must participate in assessments to measure their achievement of grade level standards. This accountability extends to the range of students with special needs who participate in either the general assessment (AzMERIT) or, for those students with significant cognitive disabilities, the alternate assessment (MSAA) based on alternate achievement standards. Title III of the ESEA provides for the inclusion of English language learners in accountability assessments with the provision of reasonable accommodations to produce valid and reliable results. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act offers certain rights and protections to students with disabilities who do not have an IEP. Section 504 contains a much broader definition of a student with disabilities. Students with 504 plan documentation can be afforded the necessary accommodations in order to participate in assessments used for accountability purposes.

Under IDEA, guidelines for how individual students with disabilities will participate in instruction and assessment are developed by an IEP team. For the purposes of accountability, the IEP team must document any accommodations or modifications necessary for the student to participate in a given assessment. The assessment a student takes is determined by the student’s disability category and the related instructional standards associated with it. Arizona students with significant cognitive disabilities being instructed on alternate achievement standards take the **Multi-State Alternate Assessment** and are included in the state’s accountability system using that measure. These students generally comprise less than two percent of the state’s student population. All other students with special needs (IEP, 504, ELL) take the general assessment, AzMERIT, with documented accommodations as allowed.

Methods

Least Restrictive Environment

The issue of inclusion for students with special needs is addressed in the IEP with the consideration of the least restrictive environment. IDEA guides this decision by requiring teams to deliberate the feasibility of instructing an individual in the general education environment – to the “maximum extent that is appropriate”. Teams must evaluate whether the general education setting, with any necessary supplemental aids and services, will meet the student’s needs. They must consider the educational as well as non-academic benefits to the student, **such as the opportunity to interact with peers for various purposes**. The impact that inclusion of the student may have on the teacher and **other** students is also weighed. Upon review of the strengths and needs documented in the IEPs PLAAFP (Present Level of Academic and Functional Performance), the team may find that an alternative setting among a continuum of services is more “appropriate” because a necessary program or service is only available

Students with high incidence disabilities such as Specific Learning Disabilities and Speech spend an average of 80% of their school day in the general education classroom.

there. But the vast majority of students with an identified disability – the students known as “high incidence” - spend the bulk of their school day in the general education classroom, requiring measures to be taken by the IEP team to ensure access to the instruction in that setting.

Rather than decisions made based on caseloads or scheduling, careful reconsideration of the impact of the LRE decision should be made in light of access to instruction based on more rigorous standards, the need for such instruction to come from a teacher knowledgeable in the discipline, and the provisions necessary for the student with special needs to access that quality instruction alongside his non-disabled peers.

Universal Design for Learning

IDEA guidance suggests that the ideal setting for instructing all students, including those with disabilities, is the general education classroom (to the maximum extent as appropriate). Before personalized learning or accommodations are employed, lesson plans should be developed *from the beginning* with access for all in mind. For teachers who plan from the perspective of UDL, there is no “average” student but rather a range of abilities and interests that characterize every classroom. Planning for a wide range of presentation, response, and engagement options eliminates much of the lesson retrofitting necessary to meet individual needs. **In addition, it diminishes the need for some accommodations because** When provisions for access are embedded in the lesson design, the breadth of available options benefits all learners.

Technology is often associated with Universal Design, although UDL practice is not synonymous with high tech. Technology is a natural **choice** when considering options that are highly engaging and able

deliver alternatives to traditional lesson formats. In many cases, students outpace teachers in their understandings and applications of these rapidly changing mediums of informational exchange. Promoting technology use among students with disabilities helps them blend seamlessly into general education settings while encouraging them to become self-advocates and more independent problem solvers. Over time students with disabilities are able to develop a “bank” useful strategies that they can use across settings to **reduce** or even eliminate the effects of their disability.

As a compliment to the principles of universal design, the formative assessment process shares it’s prospective rather than retrospective approach to instruction. This process allows the teacher to meet students where they are instructionally and take them to the next step along the trajectory toward the learning goal. UDL principles provide varied means, and the constant feedback loop of the formative assessment process allows both teachers and students to refine aspects of instruction and eliminate roadblocks in order to keep learning moving forward. These practices stand in contrast to lessons developed to reach the “average” learner, which then have to be modified and later retaught to students who fall short of mastery. While incorporating universal design and formative assessment practices may take considerable frontloading in lesson planning, it makes content more accessible from the beginning, increasing the likelihood of more students achieving mastery during the first round of instruction.

Instructional Accommodations

Although the inclusion of the principles of universal design for learning and formative assessment practices ensure greater access for a broad range of students, students with disabilities may continue to need accommodations to meet specific needs. The student–teacher feedback loop, an important part of the formative assessment process, allows teachers to fine tune instruction to meet individual needs. A teacher may need to provide additional scaffolding, or perhaps a more detailed rubric with models, to support learning. A student may need to utilize some form of assistive technology to access content or demonstrate knowledge. Potential instructional accommodations should be explored throughout the school year with students and teachers tracking what’s been tried, the success of each, and individual student preferences. This information will enable both the teacher and student to effectively engage in the IEP process of selecting accommodations for future use. As students identify tools and practices that work for them, they are better able to advocate for their needs and become more self-reliant.

Continually try out and update potential accommodations to build a “bank” of personal resources that help diminish the effects of a particular disability.

Accommodations in Assessment

To ensure the validity and reliability of assessment results, the use of testing accommodations is limited to those that do not violate the constructs being tested. Students who are accustomed to using a variety of accommodations to access content in instruction should be prepared to use alternatives,

if necessary, during assessments.

It's important to prepare students with disabilities for computer-based assessments so that the **various formats across assessments**, tools, and features presented are familiar and helpful, as they are intended to be for all students. Sample tests for each of Arizona's **assessments** are available online for this purpose. It's also important to consider individual needs as they relate to how much practice may be necessary to locate and utilize these **tools and features**. Best practice would include the use of similar formatting, features, and tools during instruction and classroom assessment throughout the year so that students get familiar with the range of applications and the functions as part of greater computer literacy as well as in preparation for using them on the assessments. Although students with disabilities may face significant challenges during assessments, adequate preparation can help them avoid any unintended obstacles that computer-based

assessments may present. **Preparation will allow them to capitalize on all the advantages that on-line testing offers.**

Don't let the format, features, and tools embedded in computer-based assessments become new barriers to students with disabilities. Fluent use will depend on adequate exposure – which will differ for each student.

Conclusion

The broader concept of accessibility must be considered by IEP teams as it relates to decisions around the least restrictive environment, engagement with grade level content at the intended degree of rigor set forth in the standards, and the potential uses of UDL and **assistive** technology as a vehicle for

access. **Placement in the LRE** should be contingent upon assurances that lessons will be routinely designed with consideration of the broad range of abilities and preferences contained within a given class. While accommodations may be selected based upon individual needs, **not all they differ in their ability to provide students access to grade level material**. IEP team members need to ensure that measures are in place, including specific accommodations, to enable students with disabilities the opportunity to understand and engage with standards based instruction. We must be prepared to address the specific needs of a student with disabilities while maintaining them on a trajectory to meet college and career readiness status upon graduation.

Readability: 16.8