



# School Psychologists' Role in Accommodations Decision Making

Students' learning and achievement in schools are regularly monitored formally and informally through classroom, district, and state assessments. These assessments must be accessible to all students, including those with disabilities and English learners. School psychologists are important service providers in determining appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

## Defining Accommodations

In this Brief, we define accommodations as changes in procedures or materials that ensure equitable access to instructional or assessment content and that generate valid assessment results for students with disabilities and English learners who need them. Although a variety of terms are used, including accessibility features and accessibility supports, **this Brief will use the term accommodations to encompass all the terms used.** They do not reduce expectations for learning (Lazarus et al., 2021; Ysseldyke et al., 2023).

Traditionally, school psychologists have served as the “gatekeepers” in the special education eligibility process. However, as the need for academic, social-emotional, and behavioral support in schools has increased, there is a push for school psychologists to serve in an expanded role. The training school psychologists receive in data-based decision making, consultation and collaboration, academic instruction and intervention, and equitable practices for diverse student populations puts them in an optimal position to provide support during the accommodation decision-making process for instruction and assessment (NASP, 2020).

## Law and Policy

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require the provision of high-quality instruction, support, and interventions for diverse students, including those with disabilities. The requirements mean that schools must provide students with reasonable accommodations during state assessments.

## Making Accommodations Decisions

The Council of Chief State School Officers’ (CCSSO) Accessibility Manual (Lazarus et al., 2021) provides a framework for educators and other specialists who serve students, including school psychologists, to use in the selection, administration, and evaluation of accommodations<sup>1</sup> for the instruction and assessment

<sup>1</sup> The CCSSO manual uses the term “accessibility supports” as well as “accommodations.” We use the term “accommodations” in place of “accessibility supports” in the five steps recommended in the CCSSO document.

of all students. The framework includes five steps in the decision-making process: (1) expect students with disabilities to achieve grade-level standards, (2) learn about accommodations for instruction and assessment, (3) select accommodations for instruction and assessment, (4) administer accommodations during instruction and assessment, and (5) evaluate the use of accommodations in instruction and assessment. School psychologists can contribute to every step of this process.

**Step 1: Hold students to grade-level standards.** All students should be held to grade-level standards (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2019; Thurlow & Quenemoen, 2019). High expectations serve as a reminder to both students and teachers that all students are capable of learning and growing. In addition, the importance of holding students to grade-level standards has repeatedly been upheld in special education law and policy.

Because school psychologists receive training in special education law and policy (NASP, 2020, Domain 10: Legal, ethical, and professional practice) they are positioned as key players in educating school staff and advocating on behalf of all students to ensure that they are held to grade-level standards and are receiving instruction that provides them access to this grade-level content. To do this, school psychologists can provide resources and support on the use of curriculum and instructional practices that are equitable, accessible, and inclusive for all students.

It is important to expect all students to achieve at grade level, but not all students will achieve these high academic standards with only general classroom instruction without support. School psychologists can play a key role in identifying and supporting students who need more targeted support and instruction to achieve grade-level expectations. To do this, school psychologists can engage in academic screening to identify students who are not achieving grade-level academic standards and then serve as part of the academic intervention team to provide more intensive and individualized support to these students.

Ensuring that school staff holds high expectations for all students is an important first step in beginning the accommodations decision-making process. School psychologists can play an important role in educating, advocating for, and supporting students who may need more intensive support to achieve at grade level.

**Step 2: Learn about accommodations for instruction and assessment.** Even after providing students with equitable, accessible, and inclusive curriculum and instruction, some students may need accommodations to gain access to grade-level content. The next step in the accommodations decision-making process consists of learning about what accommodations exist for both instruction and assessment to ensure that all relevant possibilities are considered before a decision is made. School psychologists can play an important role in interpreting, evaluating, and incorporating research evidence on accommodations (NASP, 2020). They should engage in ongoing professional development and stay up to date on the latest research and technological developments in instructional and assessment accommodations to ensure they have adequate knowledge to engage in the selection of appropriate accommodations. Additionally, school psychologists should remain familiar with district and state policies about assessment accommodations to ensure that they have the knowledge to identify appropriate accommodations that both adhere to policy and meet student needs.

**Step 3: Select accommodations for instruction and assessment.** After gaining knowledge of available accommodations and accommodation policies, school psychologists can serve as members of multi-disciplinary teams (e.g., IEP teams) to incorporate their expertise into the accommodations decision-making process (NASP, 2020). In addition to sharing their knowledge with team members, school psychologists can use their training in data-based decision making to determine which accommodations best fit the student's needs.

Data can be collected from multiple sources (i.e., student, teacher, and family perspectives) to inform the selection of accommodations for assessments. For example, data from the teacher might include student performance results and information about what accommodations are already being implemented during instruction. Data collected from the student and family may include information about student's learning preferences and their perspective of the student's needs for accommodations (Lazarus et al., 2023). Data-based decision making allows teams to engage in an accommodation selection process that is well-informed. School psychologists can serve as important and knowledgeable individuals in this collaborative process.

**Step 4: Administer accommodations during instruction and assessment.** After accommodations have been selected, it is important that they are administered with fidelity. School psychologists can play the role of consultant during this process (NASP, 2020). The consultation process might include providing educators information and resources to help them understand the function and importance of accommodations. School psychologists can provide practical guidance in the implementation of accommodations and can engage in fidelity checks to ensure that teachers or other educational personnel are being held accountable for the appropriate administration of accommodations.

**Step 5: Evaluate the use of accommodations in instruction and assessment.** After accommodations have been implemented, it is important to evaluate their effectiveness. Data should be used to inform either the continuation or discontinuation of accommodations. School psychologists can use their skills in data collection and progress monitoring to gain insight into the effectiveness of the selected accommodations or supports (NASP, 2020). This might consist of getting the perspectives of the teacher, student, and family. It is particularly important to gauge the student's perspective of their accommodations because they often have valuable insight into the complexity of their needs. Additionally, including students' voices promotes students' self-advocacy skills, an important part of empowering students to take charge of their own educational experience (Lazarus et al., 2023).

## Conclusions

School psychologists have a specialized understanding of data-based decision making, consultation, provision of academic assessment and intervention services, and the special education eligibility process (NASP, 2020). Their knowledge and skills place them in an optimal position to engage in work to support the accommodations decision-making process for both instruction and assessment. Unfortunately, school psychologists are often underused resources in schools for this process. The accommodations decision-making process is one area where school psychologists can provide valuable knowledge and expertise to support students with disabilities in instruction and assessment.

## References

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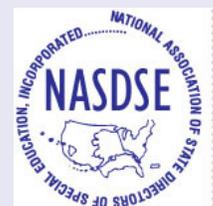
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