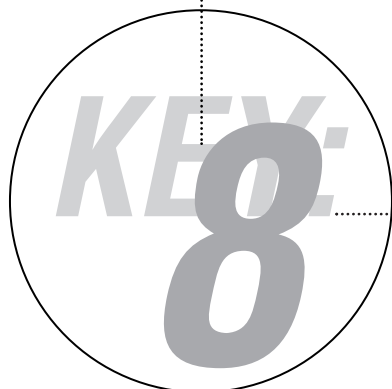


Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities



Accommodations

Students with learning disabilities face many challenges in school, however many of these difficulties can be addressed by providing accommodations. An accommodation is a change or alteration to the regular way a student is expected to learn, complete assignments or participate in the classroom. There are three types of accommodations:

- classroom/physical accommodations; e.g., alternative seating, adaptive devices
- instructional accommodations; e.g., providing copies of notes, alternative reading materials
- evaluation/testing accommodations; e.g., extra time, oral tests.

(For a list of possible accommodations, see Appendix 13, pages 93–95.)

There is growing interest in assistive technology for students with learning disabilities. The term assistive technology refers to any item, piece of equipment or product that is used to help individuals improve their ability to perform specific tasks. Assistive technology provides tools that allow individuals with learning disabilities to work more

effectively within academic and vocational settings. Computers are the most well-known form of assistive technology but there are a variety of products available to help students with learning disabilities. Students who are experiencing significant academic difficulties should consider using assistive technology, however not every student with a learning disability needs assistive technology. The decision to try assistive technology should be made on an individual basis, after considering the student's strengths, needs and motivation. (For more information about accommodations involving assistive technology, see Appendix 14, pages 96–97.)

Barriers to Effective Use of Accommodations

Teachers play a key role in helping students identify and use accommodations appropriately. Similarly, parents, students and other school personnel have important roles in selecting, monitoring and evaluating the use of accommodations. Understanding some of the common barriers to the effective use of accommodations is an important starting point. Common barriers include the following.

► Misunderstanding the purpose

- Parents, students and teachers sometimes perceive that accommodations give students with learning disabilities an unfair advantage over other students. In other words, by changing the way a student can take a test or submit an assignment, students with learning disabilities may be perceived as having opportunities that other students do not have. In reality, accommodations remove, or at least lessen, the impact of a student's learning disability and therefore give the student the **same** opportunity to succeed as other students.
- A second misunderstanding is the perception that accommodations replace the need to acquire or develop basic skills. Accommodations are necessary for many students with learning disabilities to reduce the impact of their learning disabilities, and make it easier for them to acquire and produce information. However, it is important to balance the use of accommodations with the teaching and practice of basic literacy, numeracy and study skills so that students with learning disabilities can develop their skills to their fullest potential.

- ▶ **Accommodations are often not appropriate**
 - Deciding on appropriate accommodations is not an easy task. Many teachers, psychologists and other professionals working in schools report having difficulty translating assessment information into appropriate accommodations. As a result, there is a tendency to rely on the same basic accommodations for all students with learning disabilities rather than individualizing the accommodations to match the needs and strengths of the student.
- ▶ **Accommodations are not used consistently**
 - An accommodation is essentially a change in the way something is normally done and students need time to learn how to use accommodations effectively. Accommodations must be used regularly in order for teachers to determine if they are helping. Some students report that they did not have opportunities to try accommodations before they used them on major assignments, such as tests or exams.
- ▶ **Lack of student involvement in the process**
 - Teachers and other school-based personnel often report that it is difficult to involve students in the decision-making process. Research, however, indicates that students who benefit most from accommodations are those who were involved in the process of selecting accommodations. All too often a student who benefits from an accommodation does not make full use of it because he or she is self-conscious about doing things differently than peers. Involving students in selecting accommodations provides opportunities for students to learn about accommodations and become comfortable using them.

Facilitating the Use of Accommodations

There are several important considerations that will help overcome the above barriers and facilitate the effective use of accommodations.

- ▶ **Obtain information about school, school board and provincial policies.**
 - Be sure to include accommodations on students' IPPs. Use of accommodations for diploma exams will only be permitted if they are specified on IPPs.
 - Students must have used an accommodation during the course of their regular studies in order to be permitted similar accommodations on diploma exams.
- ▶ **Use a collaborative process.**
 - Educate parents and students about the benefits of using accommodations. Be honest about the problems or difficulties students may encounter.
 - Involve relevant professionals in selecting appropriate accommodations based on their knowledge of students' strengths and needs, and the demands of the setting.
 - Ask parents and students about their preferences regarding accommodations. Respect parents' and students' opinions and attitudes toward accommodations. Do not insist on accommodations for individuals who are resistant.
- ▶ **Base decisions on a thorough understanding of student strengths and needs.**
 - Use information from both formal and informal sources when selecting accommodations.
 - Identify student strengths and try to use them to determine appropriate accommodations.
 - Try to select accommodations that are the least intrusive for students. If possible, avoid implementing accommodations that isolate students from peers or draw unnecessary attention.
 - Do not rule out accommodations that are usually associated with students with visual, hearing or mobility challenges. For instance, students with learning disabilities may benefit from large print materials or the use of a FM-system to amplify sound.

- ▶ **Use accommodations consistently and monitor student performance.**
 - Prioritize the introduction of accommodations if more than one accommodation is used. Let students become familiar with one accommodation before introducing another.
 - Consult with students about the use of accommodations after they try them. Compare the student's performance before and after.
 - Set a time to formally review the student's performance using accommodations.
 - Teach students how to use accommodations, especially if they involve assistive technology and assistance from personnel; e.g., scribes or readers.

Outcomes

The outcomes below describe potential results from implementing the strategies, activities and practices in this section.

- Parents and students work with school personnel in selecting accommodations.
- Accommodations agreed upon and included in students' IPPs are consistently implemented and monitored.
- Students are involved in deciding on and evaluating accommodations.
- Students develop an understanding of accommodations that help compensate for their learning difficulties.

Connections to Other Alberta Learning Resources

- See the following sections in *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 6 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series:
 - Instructional and Accommodations Checklist, pages LD.73–LD.75
 - Use of Technology for Accommodation, pages LD.76–LD.79
 - Alberta Education Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Examinations, page LD.199.
- See the following sections in *Teaching Students with Visual Impairments* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 5 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series:
 - Section III: Strategies, pages VI.10–VI.17
 - Section IV: Specialized Materials and Equipment, pages VI.18–VI.23.
- See *Individualized Program Plans* (Alberta Education, 1995), Book 3 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.
- See Classroom Accommodation, pages DHH.25–DHH.26 of *Teaching Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing* (Alberta Education, 1995), Book 4 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.