

Attaining Testing Accommodations for Your Child with Special Needs *Sarah Blunkosky, M.A.; Richmond*

Question | My homeschooled child has a learning disability and will need accommodations for standardized testing. What is the process for securing accommodations, both for evidence-of-progress standardized tests and for college application tests such as the SAT or ACT?

Answer | Let us discuss standardized testing for evidence of progress first. Testing accommodations are there to even the playing field as much as possible for a child with a designated learning disability or disabilities. Accommodations are not to be used to give unfair advantages or extra boosts. They are there to serve the essence of the law of equal access to educational resources and services.

As a home educator, you have leeway in administering everyday accommodations and testing modifications in your homeschool. However, each standardized test provider has guidelines on how to document accommodations for their test. If you have further questions or needs, please contact the company directly, as each test can be different. In order to uphold the collective integrity of the homeschooling community, it is best for parents to work with the company, rather than “tweaking” the test without permission.

Why Document?

Some homeschool families choose to go through the process of seeking an IEP (Individualized Education Program), 504 Plan, or ISP (Individualized Service Plan) through their local school system. This allows them to have their child’s needs documented for recordkeeping and to obtain official permission to give testing modifications during assessments such as standardized tests.

There are benefits to having your child’s needs officially documented. If school division officials are already aware of your child’s challenges, they

are more likely to give you leeway regarding progress on standardized test results if progress is unsatisfactory in areas previously noted as challenges. Your child may not be in full compliance with the standardized testing statute percentages for progress, but administrators can adapt expectations based on documented accommodations, modifications, or goal percentages agreed upon before the tests are administered.

Some homeschoolers bypass the standardized testing option by hiring an evaluator to write a proof-of-progress evaluation that can be submitted in lieu of standardized test scores. Information about both types of evidence of progress can be found within the *VaHomeschoolers Comprehensive Guide to Homeschooling at VaHomeschoolers.org/guide/home-instruction/progress*. But, even if you choose to use an evaluator, you will want those testing accommodations formally documented if your child plans to take any college readiness or application tests such as the CLEP (College Level Examination Program), PSAT/SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), or ACT (American College Test).

College Readiness and Assessment Tests

Each company that sells and regulates these readiness tests has implemented a system for documenting a student’s disability, primarily through public schools and their designated testing coordinators. According to my research, it is very difficult to independently document your child’s learning

disability directly with the company. One can do it, but the testing companies prefer you go through the school testing coordinators. These testing companies are wary of individuals gaining an unfair advantage, so each website purposefully provides deliberately vague and extensive steps to thwart those without the legally accepted criteria of permanent or temporary disability.

Yes, do be sure to apply for testing modifications if your child has a temporary disability, such as a traumatic brain injury from a car accident or a recent concussion from a sporting activity, that will affect them on testing day. Each test has deadlines for accommodation applications far in advance of the testing date. You will want at least seven weeks (though I recommend at least 14) to submit an application for accommodations. If your child becomes temporarily disabled and does not have the accommodations in place, I suggest contacting the testing company and rescheduling the test for a later date.

In order to weed out those seeking unfair advantage, testing companies will ask questions about when the learning disability was first discovered and documented. They will be understandably wary if your 16-year-old student suddenly requests extra time for tests; they will want to know what changed, and when.

If you are just now documenting your child’s learning disability a few weeks before the testing date, the testing company can legally refuse your request and you will have to mount an appeal. Thus, it is imperative to

document your child's needs for testing accommodations as soon as diagnosed. It is very easy to give up modifications that are no longer needed; adding accommodations at the last minute is difficult, sometimes impossible. The key is to document, document, document. Keep your records up to date and expect to have formal assessments redone every three years.

Pursuing Accommodations Independently

If you choose to go the independent route (i.e., without involving the school system), you will be required to pay every expense for securing documentation from the testing company's approved list of diagnostic experts. Some will be covered, some won't, by your private insurance plan; be sure to call ahead for pre-approval to avoid unbudgeted costs and be sure to seek physician referrals to specialists, if required. Most testing companies want extensive diagnostic testing demonstrating what area(s) your child needs modifications in, and what specific modifications will be required (e.g., they will want to know if your child needs extra time in all sections or just specific ones). The doctors who are able to give these criteria-specific diagnostics are specialists, such as neuropsychiatrists.

Neuropsychiatrists specialize in assessing learning disabilities based on the most updated diagnostic criteria and are licensed in the diagnostic testing you will likely need. A complete battery of tests could run from hun-

dreds to several thousands of dollars, without insurance coverage, and several visits are usually required. Once you have the results of a defined learning disability (or several), then you can apply them to your child's accommodation application. Be sure to include any information that can verify your request as authentic. I strongly urge you to both email and send hard copies of information, keep a log of whom you speak with and what is said, and follow up after two or three weeks to ensure your child's application was reviewed and is being processed.

A final and important note: each testing company has its own process, and all will require you to submit applications for testing accommodations. Please do not make the common mistake that your SAT accommodations approved by the College Board will transfer to CLEP testing centers. They are separate entities and do not share information. Make the time, months in advance, to apply and follow up patiently in order to prevent delays, test rescheduling, or stressful appeals processes. All the best in successful testing!

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Should I Request an IEP, ISP, or 504 Plan?

Any discussion about special needs likely includes references to an IEP, ISP, and/or 504 Plan. They are similar in that they are all formal plans for providing assistance to students with learning disabilities. However, there are differences amongst them that homeschooling parents should be aware of.

To receive an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), you must have an established criteria in order to qualify.

An IEP provides legal protection under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and sets the learning goals for the child, describes the services the school will provide, and offers clearly outlined ways to resolve disputes. The contents of an IEP are specified by law, and there is generally more federal funding available to the states for eligible students.

For homeschoolers, it is often beneficial to ask for an IEP at the beginning and not disclose your homeschooling status until you have received your IEP package and you need to adjust it into an Individualized Service Plan (ISP). The ISP is weaker (i.e., offers fewer services and protections); if you request an ISP first, you will likely be offered only minimal services. Having opened an IEP, the school district may be more amenable to offering more services and more flexibility of services. Many school districts are also more accommodating if your family works in either the government or military and they can bill your child's insurance coverage for speech, physical, vision, or occupational therapies.

A 504 Plan is for students with a documented disability who do not qualify for services under IDEA. Unlike the IEP, the contents are not specified by law, so it is often weaker and more vague. It is not as legally binding or enforceable as an IEP, but it does offer some accommodations to level the educational field.

A final reminder—request evaluations, never observations. Evaluations are processes that, once results are yielded, legally bind the school district to offer services. Observations are not legally binding.