

STRATEGIES for INCLUSION

of Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired in Provincial Assessments

Provincial assessment

Departments of Education in provinces across Canada routinely assess public school students to gather data on student performance. Assessment is typically scheduled for completion by students in a particular grade or in a specified subject area. Data gathered from assessment results is used to evaluate student achievement, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of specific programs/curricula, to compare the performance of students in various locations within a province, to improve teaching and learning, to facilitate student certification, and to ensure accountability.

Participation by students who are blind or visually impaired

Students who are blind or visually impaired in Atlantic Canada are fully integrated in their local schools. Because they participate in all aspects of the regular education program, it is important that they be involved in standardized provincial assessment if deemed appropriate through the individualized planning process. Some of these students have additional needs which require the expectation of different curriculum outcomes. A student who is blind or visually impaired who completes the prescribed curriculum with modifications does not participate in standardized assessment. A decision is made to exclude him/her through the individualized planning process.

When a student with a visual impairment is scheduled to participate in provincial assessment, it is necessary to provide equal access. There could be significant implications for the student who is not excluded from participating through the individual planning process, but who is deemed unable to write the provincial examinations. Specific adjustments to the examination (with permission from the test publishers), and accommodations/adaptations to the assessment process and environment will ensure that the student with a visual impairment participates in the examination. The accommodations/adaptations required will be based on the individual needs of the student and will be those used in the student's day to day programming.

Issues to consider before testing

If appropriate modifications have been made for a student who is blind or visually impaired prior to the assessment, the validity of the results will more likely be assured. Adaptations to the assessment may include things such as transcription to braille or production in audiotape or large print format. Examples of assessment modifications would include eliminating content questions requiring a visual skill which a student does not have (e.g., a question requiring colour coding for a student who does not have colour vision). Examples of assessment accommodations/adaptations are such things as extending the time limit, or assigning a scribe. Accommodations/adaptations to the assessment environment might include the provision of direct lighting or the assignment of the student to an area where the use of adaptive technology does not disturb classmates.

Possible considerations

Medium to be used

- braille
- large print
- audiotape
- computer disk

Time requirements

- time and a half or double time
- consideration for student's reading and writing speed
- consideration for time needed to use adaptive equipment
- consideration for eye fatigue and scanning ability

Test content

- difficulties with complex graphs, maps and graphics
- revision or elimination of questions requiring the use of visual perceptual skills
- revision or elimination of questions using visual language (e.g., "twinkle")
- print size, spacing of words, letters and lines
- degree of contrast on the page
- possible requirement of concrete objects or verbal explanations for concepts

Testing environment

- differing needs for specific lighting
- easy access to an electrical outlet to accommodate use of adaptive equipment
- seating, in an appropriate space, to accommodate materials and equipment
- consideration of noise output from adaptive technology
- provision of low vision aids and familiarity of examiners with such aids

Potential question and answer formatting difficulties

- filling in the blanks
- filling in coded circles for multiple choice
- matching questions to answers
- completing crosswords
- labeling diagrams
- spelling based on braille contractions
- questions which require library/research skills
- questions which require use of software which is visually inaccessible

Ensuring participation of students who are blind or visually impaired

With advance notification and planning, students who are blind or visually impaired can participate in standardized assessment. APSEA staff, namely itinerant teachers and/or the provincial supervisors, will liaise with other education personnel and will act as a resource for each student who is blind or visually impaired. Since procedures for providing access to assessment vary from province to province, it is crucial to seek appropriate advice before beginning the process.

Summary

Students with visual impairments who follow the outcomes of a provincially prescribed curriculum without modifications must have the opportunity to participate in the standardized assessment process. Information collected from the performance of students who are blind or visually impaired is crucial to the evaluation of the public school system and also provides important data relative to the performance of students with visual impairments. The meaningful inclusion of students who are blind or visually impaired has positive social and educational consequences for both students and educators.

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