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Article published Oct 2, 2007

Accommodations allowed, but some scores don't count

By [Michael Brindley](#) Telegraph Staff

For some students, their score on the New England Common Assessment Program, New Hampshire's high-stakes assessment exam, has been determined before they've answered a single question.

Though not common, there are instances in which students are allowed to take the test with modifications that haven't been allowed by the state, said Tim Kurtz, who oversees assessments for the state Department of Education.

In those cases, no matter how well the students do, they are assigned the minimum possible score for that test, he said.

In many cases, the students have special needs and teachers and parents make the decision about how the student is going to take the test, he said.

"If they decide to go forward with the modification, then they have that right," Kurtz said. "But there's no way for the student to pass in that case."

Students across the state are starting their NECAP testing this week, the results of which are used to determine whether schools are making Adequate Yearly Progress.

The testing is a mandate of the federal No Child Left Behind law. Students in grades 3-8 and one grade at the high school are tested in math and reading, with some grades also taking a writing portion of the test.

Just as the school year was starting this fall, 191 of the state's 377 elementary and middle schools were informed that they had not made AYP in either math or reading, or both.

In many of those cases, schools failed because their special education students didn't score well enough. In the 44 cases in which schools failed in only one area, it was the special education subgroup.

Scores are broken down into subgroups, based on students' race and socioeconomic status, and if they received special education or ESL services.

One of the things schools must do to prepare for the testing is to determine whether students are going to need certain accommodations, which can be a long, complicated process, educators say.

The state has a list of 31 approved accommodations that can be used for any student, regardless of whether they have a disability.

Among those approved accommodations are giving the test individually in a separate location, having a student read the test and directions aloud, and using an abacus for students with severe visual impairment or blindness.

If an accommodation that is not on the list is needed for a student, the school must contact the state Department of Education.

Kurtz said that while the state cannot reject any accommodations, according to federal special education laws, it does determine whether the way students take the test is "comparable or non-comparable."

For example, reading the reading test to a student invalidates all reading sessions. Any other accommodations deemed non-comparable receive a minimum score, even if the student acs the test.

Even though they receive the minimum score, the student gets credit for participating. That's important, said Kurtz, because schools are also held accountable for student participation rates.

But their score is also part of the overall school's performance, and because of the way AYP is determined using subgroups, that could have an impact on whether a whole school passes or fails, Kurtz said.

"A few students in a subgroup could make a difference, certainly," he said.

The state doesn't track how many students are given minimum scores, but it's "very few," said Gaye Fedorchak, who oversees alternative testing for the state.

She said she hopes to see the state start keeping track of data regarding how frequently certain accommodations are used.

A committee will be re-evaluating the list of approved accommodations over the next few months to come up with a new list in time for the science test in the spring, she said.

"The research in the area of accommodations is a growing area," she said.

The reason for having standards for accommodations is because it may take away from what the student is supposed to be tested on, she said. For example, if a student

has a story from the reading portion of the test read to them, it could take away from measuring the student's skills, she said.

"That would violate the essential construct of what we're trying to test," she said.

Philip Schappler, principal at Sunset Heights Elementary School, said determining what accommodations a student is going to need is a process that begins months in advance.

"We try to put it all together when we do our transition plan at the end of the year," Schappler said.

One example last year was when a student who had difficulty with vision and couldn't use the clear ruler that was provided for the test.

"We asked if we were allowed to take a marker and color the ruler red," he said. "We were told that was fine, because it doesn't alter the test. It didn't give her any advantage."

Generally speaking, the school tries to give students the same kinds of accommodations they would get when taking any other test, he said. Schappler said he couldn't envision a situation where a student would use a modification that would guarantee a failing grade.

"I don't know why you would choose to do that," he said.

Kurtz said there have been some unique accommodations allowed by the state, including one that allowed a student to read passages into a tape recorder and then listen to himself.

The state has also approved the use of a headset device called a Whisper Phone, which allows students to talk to themselves and hear what they're saying more clearly.

It allows students to hear their voices over any other background noise, he said.

"That's a perfectly reasonable accommodation," he said.