

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Although Some Students May Receive Extra Time on Standardized Tests That Is Not Deserved, Others May Not Be Getting the Assistance They Need

REPORT NUMBER 2000-108, NOVEMBER 2000

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the process for granting extra time on standardized tests to students with learning disabilities revealed that:

- Very few students receive extra time on standardized tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), ACT, and the Standardized Testing and Reporting exam.***
 - Wide demographic disparities existed between those 1999 graduating seniors who received extra time on the SAT and those who did not.***
 - Some deserving students may not be receiving the accommodations they need on standardized tests because schools and parents are not aware of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.***
 - Some undeserving students may be receiving extra time on standardized tests; however, the potential magnitude of this problem is limited.***
-

We reviewed the process for granting accommodations to students with learning disabilities when taking college admissions tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT); ACT, formerly known as the American College Testing Program; and other standardized exams, including those administered under the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program.

To help compensate for their disabilities, disabled students often need accommodations on school work and standardized tests, such as extended time, scribes, or large-print formats. Two federal laws, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), ensure that disabled students receive the educational services they need and are not subject to discriminatory practices. Students eligible for accommodations on standardized tests typically qualify for special education under IDEA and have individualized education programs (IEPs) or have Section 504 plans. IEPs and Section 504 plans are tailored to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities and serve as agreements outlining the services schools will provide. Our audit revealed the following:

Very few students receive extra time on standardized tests. For example, less than 2 percent of the 1999 graduating seniors nationwide who took the SAT received extra time, and in California, the rate was less than 1.2 percent. Likewise, less than 2 percent of the 4.2 million California students in grades 2 through 11 who took the STAR exam during the 1998–99 school year received extra time. Although few students received extra time on the SAT, those who did were disproportionately white or were more likely to come from an affluent family or to attend a private school. Such disparities did not exist for students taking the STAR exam.

Finding #1: Some deserving students may not be getting the assistance they need on standardized tests.

Because so few students receive accommodations on standardized tests, it appears that some students might not be getting the assistance they need. In fact, among 1,012 public schools and 584 private schools with seniors who took the exam, not one 1999 graduating senior received extra time on the SAT. This represents 70 percent and 73 percent, respectively, of all such public and private schools in California. While the cause of this problem may vary from district to district, lack of awareness of Section 504 and weaknesses in district processes for identifying students with suspected disabilities would seem to be contributing factors. The two school districts in our sample—San Francisco Unified and Los Angeles Unified—with below average percentages of students receiving extra time on the SAT also had low percentages of students with Section 504 plans compared to the other districts we visited. Los Angeles Unified School District has been criticized for having a weak process for identifying students with disabilities.

To ensure that students with learning disabilities are identified and receive the services they need, we recommended that all California school districts ensure compliance with the requirements of Section 504. Specifically, procedures should exist to identify and evaluate students with disabilities and to ensure that all eligible students receive the accommodations they need. Additionally, districts should ensure that staff, parents, and students are aware of services available to eligible students under Section 504.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

To increase Section 504 awareness, Los Angeles Unified School District conducted six Section 504 training sessions for newly assigned administrators and assistant principals, and 38 training sessions for other school staff during fiscal year 2000–01. Through January 2002, it conducted one additional Section 504 staff development session for new assistant principals, and 10 more training sessions for other staff.

Likewise, San Francisco Unified School District has provided Section 504 training to site administrators during the 2001–02 school year, with further training scheduled for spring 2002. The district also sent a memorandum to principals reminding them to review all Section 504 plans to ensure that any student whose plan calls for extra time for test taking receives that accommodation on the Spring 2002 STAR exam.

Finding #2: Some undeserving students may be receiving extra time on standardized tests.

Our review of the files of 330 California students from 18 public schools, most of whom obtained extra time on standardized tests, found that the basis for their accommodations was questionable in 60 instances, or 18.2 percent. The frequency and seriousness of questionable cases varied substantially from district to district. However, because less than 2 percent of total SAT and STAR test takers receive extra time, the potential magnitude of undeserving students receiving extra time is limited.

Six of the seven districts we reviewed did not have adequate records to support the accommodations some students received. However, only San Dieguito Union High School District displayed significant, widespread problems. For example, its incorrect interpretation of Section 504 allowed potentially ineligible students to obtain extra time on college entrance exams. The threat of litigation also caused one district to provide an unwarranted Section 504 plan that was used by a student to obtain questionable accommodations on a college entrance exam. Finally, vague instructions on the College Board's eligibility form and weaknesses in its own approval process may have allowed some undeserving students to receive extra time on the SAT. As a result, these students may have had an unfair advantage over other students taking college admissions tests.

To ensure that ineligible students do not gain an unfair advantage on standardized tests, we recommended that San Dieguito Union High School District revise its policies to ensure that it provides Section 504 plans only to students whose impairment substantially limits a major life activity. Decisions regarding eligibility, placement, and services to be provided should be made only by a team qualified to make such decisions and should be based on the district's own evaluation of disabilities and their impact on learning.

We also recommended that Acalanes Union High School District, Beverly Hills Unified School District, Palo Alto Unified School District, and San Francisco Unified School District provide or request extra time on standardized tests only when such an accommodation is warranted and documented in the student's IEP or Section 504 plan.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

San Dieguito Union High School District revised its Section 504 procedures and all existing Section 504 plans were reviewed for compliance with the new procedures. Students previously receiving Section 504 plan accommodations without appropriate documentation of a current disability and/or evidence of a significant impact on learning have been denied Section 504 plan renewal. Consequently, the number of Section 504 plans for the district decreased from 367 in fiscal year 2000–01 to 184 in fiscal year 2001–02.

Beverly Hills Unified School District states that it will continue to follow and closely monitor its policy of providing an accommodation, such as extended time on tests, only when it is written in a student's Section 504 plan or IEP.

Palo Alto Unified School District states that it continues to follow a formal process for designation of extra time on tests for students with IEPs and Section 504 eligibility. However, the district has revised its Section 504 process to include more specific designations of the need for testing accommodations.

District Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Acalanes Union High School District has incorporated presentations on testing accommodations into its staff development program as a regular activity. The district has also begun a process of revising both its internal operational guidelines for determining and reporting appropriate accommodations for disabilities, and of creating informational pamphlets for public use on these, and other, special education and Section 504 topics. The district's goal is to have both of these tasks completed and implemented by late spring 2002.

San Francisco Unified School District selected a random sample of 10 percent of the special education students who took the Spring 2001 STAR exam with extended time and is manually verifying that those students had extended time as an accommodation in their IEP plans. The district plans to improve its special education database so that in the future it will be easier to verify that students who received accommodations on standardized tests had IEP plans authorizing those accommodations.