

Glossary

Most people familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) know that it gives students with disabilities the right to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Exactly what this means on a daily basis for students and teachers affects how programs, instruction, and services are provided to students. The process also involves a potentially dizzying set of terms with definitions that sometimes repeat or overlap. All of these terms, however, suggest avenues for students with disabilities to better learn and develop important skills throughout their school years. What follows is a list of definitions for some of these key words.

Accommodations constitute any adjustment that helps a student overcome or “work around” a disability. Specific accommodations range widely. Providing Braille readers or large-print books to a student who is visually impaired constitutes an accommodation, as do curb cuts for students who are confined to wheelchairs. By definition, an accommodation does not alter or lower the standards or expectations for a subject or test, whatever else it changes. Through a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan, classroom accommodations may be formally identified and put in place, although many teachers make informal accommodations for students in their classes, whether or not the students have a disability.

Adaptations involve the adjustment of content, methodology, delivery, or instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability in order to ensure access to the general curriculum. See, “specially designed instruction.”

Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching and managing a classroom that allows teachers to factor the many differences within a mixed-ability classroom into planning and delivering instruction and ultimately provide multiple learning options and different paths to learning that (1) help students take in information and make sense of concepts and skills, and (2) provide appropriate levels of challenge for all students, including those who struggle and those who are advanced. Differentiated instruction does not involve developing a separate lesson plan for each student in a classroom or watering down the curriculum for anyone. While differentiated instruction is not mandated by IDEA, current brain research does confirm it as an effective approach for supporting the learning needs of all students. To read more, go to www.diffcentral.com/whatisdi.html.

Instructional supports are any person, strategy, or program that, in effect, “supports” the student in learning. This broad category includes curricula that are designed for diverse learners (see UDL below); resource specialists, who are trained to adapt instructional materials and strategies so that students can better learn; and paraprofessionals, who assist a student in classroom activities and instruction.

Modifications involve any changes made to the level and type of content to be taught (thus different from an accommodation). Modifications usually only apply to the one or two percent of students with significant disabilities who, regardless of all possible accommodation, services, or supports, cannot benefit from the level and type of curriculum being offered to all students. Modifications, which must be clearly spelled out in the IEP, may apply to an instructional approach, method, material, timing, setting, and/or arrangement. Modifications need to be considered and used carefully, since students for whom material and work are modified may find that they are not ready for a program that leads to a standard diploma in high school.

Related services are any developmental, corrective, or support service, provided by trained professionals, “as may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education” [IDEA]. The IEP team decides which related services a child needs and specifies them in the child’s

IEP. The law lists the following examples of related services, but does not intend this list to be exclusive: audiology, occupational therapy; physical therapy; psychological services; medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes only; school health services; transportation services; counseling services; speech-language pathology; social work services; parent counseling and training; recreation therapy; and early identification and assessment of disabilities in children.

Specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of a student with a disability, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction (1) to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and (2) to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum. Examples include giving an audio recording of a textbook chapter to a student with a learning disability so he can both hear and read the words at the same time.

Supplementary aids & services represent a type of support that is not a “special education and related service” but one that a child still needs in order to be educated with his or her nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. These supports “supplement” other efforts. Some examples include adapted equipment—such as a special seat or a cut-out cup for drinking; assistive technology—such as special computer software, or a communication system; training for staff, student, and/or parents; peer tutors; a one-on-one aide; adapted materials—such as large print books, books on tape, or books with highlighted notes; and collaboration/consultation among staff, parents, and/or other professionals.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of principles—a blueprint—for developing a curriculum that creates instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that support learning for everyone. It is a flexible approach that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. UDL presents information and content in different and carefully chosen ways, differentiating the ways that students can express what they know, and stimulating interest and motivation for learning. For more about UDL, go to www.cast.org/udl/.