

## SECTION 4: TEACHING STUDENTS WITH INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

According to the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 50 percent of all students receiving special education services have invisible disabilities. For example, students with learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or emotional disturbances may be receiving special education services, supports, and accommodations even though they do not appear to have a disability. There are numerous other invisible disabilities such as heart conditions, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Juvenile Fibromyalgia, and Seizure Disorder. The severity of students' functional limitations does not depend on your personal ability to see the disability.

There may be several students in your classroom with invisible disabilities. Of these students, some may receive accommodations such as extended time on assessments or study aids such as guided notes. Other students may have behavioral contracts to increase or decrease certain targeted behaviors. For those students who receive accommodations, services, or support, it is important to collaborate with the student and special education staff to meet the needs of the student. If you would like to know more about students with invisible disabilities than is provided in this section, ask the special educators in your school or refer to the resources listed in Section 9.

### Learning Disabilities

A specific learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language—spoken or written—which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes conditions, such as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are

primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of cognitive impairment/mental retardation; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantages.

Students with learning disabilities often learn differently than their peers. Although they often have average or above average intelligence, there is frequently a discrepancy between their abilities and their achievements in specific areas due to a central nervous system dysfunction. A learning disability is a permanent disorder that interferes with integrating, acquiring, or demonstrating verbal or nonverbal abilities and skills. Frequently, there are some processing or memory deficits as well.

### Common Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities may have difficulties with one or more of the following:

- ◆ Reading comprehension.
- ◆ Mathematics.
- ◆ Oral expression.
- ◆ Written expression.
- ◆ Auditory processing.
- ◆ Visual processing.
- ◆ Abstract reasoning.
- ◆ Visual spatial skills.
- ◆ Processing speed.

Keep in mind that one person doesn't have difficulty with all of the above-mentioned areas. Also, it is not unusual for people with learning disabilities to be gifted in some areas.

Students with learning disabilities experience a wide range of learning, social, and emotional problems. Each student with a learning disability may need different types of accommodations, services, or support based on what area of learning is affected by the disability.

## Teaching Suggestions and Common Accommodations for Students with Learning Disabilities

In addition to the teaching suggestions presented in *Section 2, Meeting the Needs of All Learners*, students with learning disabilities may also benefit from the following suggestions.

**Supportive Environment:** At the beginning of the course announce that you are willing to provide accommodations for all students. Meet individually with students who are having difficulty. You should ask:

- ◆ “In what ways can I help you understand the material we cover in class?”
- ◆ “Can we work together to brainstorm some possible solutions for difficulties you might have with this class?”
- ◆ “How have other teachers helped you learn?”

**Teaching Style:** Provide important information and assignments in both oral and written formats to help promote students’ understanding by hearing and seeing content. Using a variety of teaching styles to present information assists students in learning that is consistent with their preferred learning styles.

**Reading Assignments:** Decrease the amount of required reading by providing summaries of important concepts.

**Peer Teams:** Allow students to work in pairs or small groups for cooperative learning. Select groupings based upon students’ strengths.

**Technology:** Allow students to use technology to support the learning effort. Examples include Personal Digit Assistants (PDAs), computers, or spell checkers. Use technology to enhance the learning experience through videos, DVDs, computer software, and Web sites.

**Use of Color:** Allow students to use highlighters, sticky notes, colorful folders, and binders to organize their work.

**Word Wall:** Create a word wall in your classroom that lists common terminology students need to learn and apply appropriately. Be sure to incorporate color, pictures, and textures wherever possible.

**Evaluating Progress:** In addition to traditional assessment, student portfolios can be used

to evaluate student progress and become part of the permanent observation documentation of students’ performance.

**Constructing Assessments:** When constructing assessments, use a variety of questions including multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essay. Consider creating essay questions that require discussion of only one concept at a time. For example, when asking students to identify a balanced meal, prompt them with key phrases, such as “protein, vegetable, fruit, and carbohydrate” and ask students to discuss foods from each category. Given that many students with special needs have difficulty with essay questions, allow students to list key facts and important information instead.

**Assessment Accommodations:** Provide students with appropriate accommodations during assessments. For example, provide extended time for students, a different assessment format, or a distraction-reduced assessment location.

**Assess Essential FACS Content:** As an FACS teacher, you want to test students on your content area. Students with difficulty in reading or math may need accommodations to take assessments. Examples include allowing students to take assessments orally, use calculators, or adaptive technology as indicated in their IEPs. See *Section 3* for more information on assessments.

**Grading Written Responses:** For students who have difficulty with writing, allow them to focus on the main ideas of the assignment rather than on the mechanics of writing. Grade the student according to the quality of content, not on spelling and sentence structure.

**Alternative Format:** Some students with learning disabilities need print material in an alternative format (e.g., books, recipes, or tests on tape or in an electronic format). The special education teacher in your school district will work with you to convert course materials to an alternative format for those students who require this accommodation.

It takes considerable time to convert materials into an alternative format. Planning ahead is important to meeting the special needs of students with learning disabilities who require alternative formats.

**Study Aids:** Provide study questions, study guides, and time for questions and answers to help students review essential course content.

Students with learning disabilities may surpass their peers in some areas, while needing accommodations for reading, writing, or math tasks. Jillian’s teacher recalls how Jillian excelled in her eye-hand coordination while completing a sewing project in the following case study.

## CASE STUDY

### **Jillian Excels with Lab Assignments**

In Jillian’s Life Skills class students learn about different careers and then complete a hands-on activity that relates to their career interests. We were studying careers in fashion, fabrics, clothing manufacturing, and sales. I asked students to sew on a button, one skill needed to become an alterations specialist. I provided instructions to students in multiple formats: I handed out written instructions and then verbally described the instructions as I demonstrated the technique. Students could watch, listen, or read before they tried to sew on the button. I also coached them as they did their work.

I was surprised at the wide quality range of work students turned in. Though almost all students said they hadn’t sewn on buttons before, some looked much better than a first attempt. However, the sewing work that Jillian turned in was stunning! It looked like a professional had sewn on the button. Jillian said that she had never done this type of work before. She seemed somewhat matter of fact about the quality of her work, but pleased when I com-

plimented her on it. Throughout the next few weeks, Jillian consistently turned in high quality activity work.

When we finished the clothing module, we moved to more pencil and paper activities. I was shocked at the first written paper that Jillian submitted. I had no idea what she had written. Her words bore no resemblance to the correct answers. When I asked her about it, she told me she was dyslexic. Since Jillian excelled with hands-on activities, I had no idea she had a disability.

After meeting with the special education teacher and seeing Julian’s IEP, I began to test Jillian’s understanding of the material through a verbal interview instead of a written assessment. With this accommodation, Jillian excelled in the Life Skills class.

**Following Up** Jillian’s teacher learned a valuable lesson about working with students with disabilities. Jillian appeared to learn best through kinesthetic learning experiences; however, with the appropriate accommodations Jillian was able to demonstrate her competency with the course content.

## **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**

Students with ADHD or ADD (without hyperactivity) are characterized by “persistent patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that is more frequent and severe than is typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development,” according to the American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.

ADHD is a commonly diagnosed behavioral disorder affecting approximately five percent of school-aged children, or well over two million children. A number of conditions coexist with ADHD, such as depression, anxiety disorders,

bipolar and conduct disorders, or oppositional defiant disorder. The percentage of students with ADHD who are also identified as having a learning disability ranges from 25–50 percent.

Students with ADHD who are not being treated with either medication or a behavior management program are frequently and easily distracted by sounds, activities, and other non-essential information. These students may have difficulty with relationships, fail in school, and experience low self-esteem if they are not treated for ADHD. Although IDEA, the federal law guiding special education services, does not recognize ADHD as a disability category, students with ADHD can be served under the “other health impairments” category and receive special education services.

## ADHD Challenges

Students with ADHD may have difficulty with one or more of the following areas:

- ◆ Concentration.
- ◆ Following directions.
- ◆ Distractibility.
- ◆ Listening.
- ◆ Organization.
- ◆ Sitting for lengthy periods.
- ◆ Completing task.
- ◆ Transitioning.
- ◆ Sedentary tasks like reading.
- ◆ Planning.

Some students with ADHD take medication for this condition. The medication may be a stimulant, which actually calms the student and helps him or her focus on tasks. Antidepressants may also be used. These medications always require a physician's prescription. Any prescriptions for students are generally kept in locked storage and dispensed at the appropriate times by the school nurse or appropriate professional. Teachers do not need to monitor whether students' take their medications; however, they are often asked to complete surveys or teacher-rated behavior scales to determine the degree to which the student is engaged in various class activities.

## Teaching Suggestions and Common Accommodations for Students with ADHD

In addition to the previous teaching suggestions for students with learning disabilities and those provided in *Section 2: Meeting the Needs of All Learners*, consider the following suggestions.

**Assistance with Structure:** Provide a course outline with clearly delineated expectations and due dates. Study guides, review sheets, and frequent opportunities for feedback are helpful in providing structure and organization.

**Assessment Accommodations:** Assist students in arranging for appropriate assessment accommodations with the special education specialist. Many students with ADHD use exam accommodations including extended time and distraction-reduced assessment locations.

**Assistive Technology:** Software programs are available that highlight text on the computer

screen or actually read the text to students. Many students with ADHD have found that these programs help them focus.

### **Accommodate the Need for Movement:**

Allow students to expend energy in positive, but non-disruptive ways. For example, some students like to doodle while others prefer to massage a stress ball or a pencil grip. Build movement into the class structure that allows students to stretch and move around the room.

**Access to Class Notes:** Some students have difficulty focusing and taking class notes. They need your assistance to ensure that students gain quality notes. Many teachers ask a student with good note-taking skills to share their notes for a student who has difficulty taking complete notes.

**Classroom Distractions:** If a student appears extremely distracted, it may be appropriate to encourage the student to sit near the front of the class, away from doors, air conditioning units, windows, or any other possible sources of distraction.

In the case study on page 41, notice how Chris used assistive technology (AT) to complete his Internet assignments. Assistive technology can eliminate distractions and help a student with outlining key content and organizing his or her notes.

## Serious Emotional Disturbance

According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2003, currently there are approximately eight percent of students with disabilities identified as Serious Emotionally Disturbed (SED). Students with SED may be described as emotionally disturbed, severely behaviorally handicapped, emotional and behavioral disordered, socially maladjusted, psychologically disordered, emotionally handicapped, or even psychotic if their behaviors are extremely abnormal or bizarre.

IDEA defines the term SED as, "a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects educational performance." These characteristics include:

- ◆ An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, and health factors.
- ◆ An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- ◆ Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- ◆ A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- ◆ A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

SED includes schizophrenia; however, it does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance according to IDEA.

### SED Behaviors

Students with emotional and behavior disorders exhibit behavior that can be categorized as either acting out or withdrawn. Acting out

behaviors include such antisocial actions as getting out of a seat, yelling, talking out, disturbing peers, hitting, fighting, complaining, or stealing. Students who are withdrawn often act immature and often do not have the social skills to make friends.

Students with psychiatric disabilities are sometimes categorized as either SED or “Other Health Impaired.” Descriptions of certain types of psychiatric disorders follow:

- ◆ **Depression** is a major disorder that can begin at any age. Major depression may be characterized by a depressed mood most of each day, a lack of pleasure in most activities, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, and/or thoughts of suicide.
- ◆ **Bipolar disorder (manic depressive disorder)** causes a person to experience periods of mania and depression. In the manic phase, a person might experience inflated self-esteem and a decreased need to sleep; however, in the depressive phase, a person may experience a lack of energy and less self-esteem and interest in family, friends, and school.
- ◆ **Anxiety disorders** can disrupt a person’s ability to concentrate and cause hyperventilation, a racing heart, chest pains, dizziness, panic, and extreme fear. Examples of anxiety disorders include panic disorders, simple phobias such as agoraphobia (irrational anxiety about being in places from which escape might be difficult), and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).
- ◆ **Schizophrenia** can cause a person to experience delusions and hallucinations in addition to a depressed mood and flat emotional reactions.

In most situations, you will not be aware that you have a student with a psychiatric disability in your classroom. Some do not need or request any accommodations, and some require a variety of accommodations. Even though students may not show any outward signs of their disabilities, their disabilities can still be disabling. For some the disability is temporary, while for others it is chronic. With medication and/or therapy, people with emotional or psychiatric disabilities may learn to manage their symptoms.

## CASE STUDY

### Assistive Technology to the Rescue

Ms. Kim requires her students to find and report on information found on the Internet. She noticed that Chris was never successful in completing the assignment during the allotted time period. She moved Chris’ computer station to the one closest to the front of the room—the station with the assistive technology (AT) programs installed. She showed Chris how to use the AT so that as he was reading the words were highlighted on the screen. He also could turn the voice-recognition feature on if he didn’t know all the words. Chris could adjust the speed of the voice reading as well as the tone and gender of the voice. With the AT, Chris could complete his assignments within the class period. The AT provided the support Chris needed to be successful.

**Following Up** With the appropriate accommodations, Chris was able to complete assignments at the same time as the remainder of his class. In what ways might assistive technology help your students?

## Teaching Suggestions and Common Accommodations for Students with SED

Students with emotional disturbances and/or psychiatric disabilities need a nurturing and safe classroom environment.

**Supportive Environment:** Many students with psychiatric disabilities fear stigmatization because of their disability. If a student shares with you about his or her disability, be supportive and welcoming when a student requests assistance in arranging for accommodations, such as extended time on assessments.

**Clearly Defined Learning Goals:** A course outline with clearly delineated statements about your expectations is helpful to students who need help with structure and organization. The course outline and learning goals can serve as an “advanced organizer” to prepare the student for upcoming assignments and assessments.

**Assessment Accommodations:** Upon request, assist students in arranging for assessment accommodations, such as extra time or a distraction-reduced assessment location.

**Make-up Work:** Collaborate with students about arrangements to make up tests and other assignments, allowing them extra time since these students may miss school due to serious psychiatric episodes.

**Web-Enhanced Learning:** If classroom materials are available on the Web, students with emotional or psychiatric disabilities may be able to engage in learning via the Internet. Learning through computer access is becoming a popular medium for students whose disabilities prevent them from participating in traditional classroom activities.

**Inappropriate Behavior:** Students with disabilities are subject to the same code of conduct required of any student at your school. If there are incidences of inappropriate behavior, give concise and honest feedback about behaviors that are inappropriate. If there are situations involving threats or abusive behavior, always follow your school policy.

## Gifted and Talented Students

The Gifted and Talented Children’s Act defines students who are gifted and talented as those, “possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, specific academic or leadership ability, or in the performing or visual arts, and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school.”

Students who are gifted and talented need specialized educational programs in the form of modified curriculum and specialized instructional activities to enhance their individual talents. These students may likely become our outstanding leaders, scientists, artists, researchers, and inventors.

Students with learning, sensory, or physical disabilities may also be gifted and talented students. Through the IDEA law, these students are eligible for special education services, including accommodations and supports as determined through the IEP process. In order for gifted and talented students with disabilities to reach their potential, it is critical that their intellectual strengths be recognized and nurtured. At the same time, their disabilities should be appropriately accommodated.

### Gifted and Talented Traits

Gifted students with disabilities often use their intellectual gifts to try to circumvent their disabilities. According to the ERIC Clearinghouse on *Disabilities and Gifted Education*, students who are gifted and talented:

- ◆ Are often perfectionistic and idealistic. They may equate self-esteem and self-worth with achievement and grades.
- ◆ May be at different developmental levels at the same time regarding their chronological ages and physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
- ◆ Are learners who rapidly acquire, retain, and use large amounts of information.
- ◆ Are highly sensitive to criticism, yet may appear careless, as evidenced by losing their assignments, forgetting their homework, or being disorganized.

- ◆ Are often bored, as evidenced by poor attention, daydreaming, and low tolerance for persistence on tasks that they don't see as relevant to themselves.
- ◆ Are problem solvers who often reframe questions and create novel solutions to problems.

## Teaching Suggestions and Common Accommodations for Students Who Are Gifted and Talented

Students who are gifted and talented need to be exposed to challenging and conceptually rich curricula. School districts have typically implemented four strategies to address the needs of these students:

- ◆ **Acceleration:** Provides opportunities for the student to move through the required content at a faster pace. For example, students may skip a grade, test out of courses, and/or be placed in a more challenging math class while remaining in regular classes for other content areas.
- ◆ **Curriculum Compacting:** Involves compressing the instructional content and materials so that academically able students have more time to work on challenging projects.
- ◆ **Enrichment:** Involves adding new and different information from a variety of disciplines outside the traditional curriculum.
- ◆ **Curriculum Outside the Classroom:** Involves the use of mentors, internships, and special projects to enhance learning experiences. Using community resources to supplement the education of students who are gifted and talented is commonly implemented to meet the special needs of this population.

Specific strategies that you can implement to maximize the time that students who are gifted and talented spend in your classroom follow.

### Engage Students in Independent

**Inquiry:** Allow students an opportunity to negotiate self-directed research projects that meet and expand your course objectives.

### Relevant Learning Environment:

Implement a flexibly structured learning environment that converts your classroom into a laboratory that closely resembles the real world.

**Instructional Considerations:** Provide individual pacing and challenging activities at an advanced level. Promote self-direction that enables students to use their strengths and preferred learning styles.

**Mentoring Programs:** The opportunity to work with mentors who demonstrate how classroom learning objectives are implemented in real-world settings is a powerful learning experience for students.

**Classroom Dynamics:** Discuss the implications of your students' capabilities and special learning needs. If classroom questions arise regarding special needs, deal with them openly and honestly; however, these types of questions and answers should be discussed on an individual basis. Expect participation in all activities and treat each student with respect. Celebrate individual differences.

## Summary

Remember, it's your responsibility to support your school's commitment to equal access to education. This information will help you deliver a quality education to all students, including students who are gifted and talented as well as to students with disabilities. Contact a special education teacher if you have questions or concerns about the students in your classroom.