



Accessible Educational Materials: A Parent's Guide to Getting Started

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Introduction

This guide will help parents and caregivers of students with disabilities understand accessible educational materials (AEM), identify if their child could benefit from AEM, and, if needed, get started on the process of ensuring their child is provided AEM.

About AEM

As a parent or caregiver of a child with a disability, you may have noticed most educational materials are made in a way that is difficult for some students with disabilities to use. For example, paper or print material requires a student to actually see the material, hold it, and read the text for it to benefit their learning. Many digital resources require students to see and read information on a screen, hear information coming from audio or video sources, or use a mouse and keyboard—things that students who are blind or have low vision, who are deaf or hard of hearing, who have physical disabilities, or who have learning disabilities, can have trouble with. The good news is there are solutions.

When an educational material can be used by a student with a disability at the same time, and with the same ease, as all other students, that material is an accessible educational material (AEM).

The Law and Students Who Need AEM

Parents and caregivers of students with disabilities should be aware of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The IDEA is the law for special education in the U.S., ensuring students with disabilities receive what is known as a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The IDEA requires schools to provide needed support for students with disabilities, so these students have as much access as possible to the general education curriculum. Providing AEM in a timely manner falls under IDEA's requirements. When a student with a disability needs AEM to access the general education curriculum, it should be available without delay. For students receiving special education services, a consideration of their need for and use of AEM should be documented in the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits programs and activities receiving federal funding, including public schools, to discriminate against any student based on their disability. Like IDEA, Section 504 requires schools to provide FAPE to students with

disabilities. Under Section 504, any student with a disability who needs AEM to access the general education curriculum has the right to receive them.

Steps Parents and Caregivers Can Take

It may not always be clear when your child needs AEM. Some students are so used to making do with non-accessible materials, they develop strategies to work around the lack of AEM, which can lead to overworking and burning out. Some students have lost confidence in their abilities and believe their struggles are caused by a personal failing—not realizing AEM could make a difference in their ability to learn. Most students are not even aware of AEM as an option, so they may not bring their struggles to your attention.

If you observe your child having difficulty using educational materials, the first step is to talk with your child. Start a conversation by saying something like, “I noticed you were having difficulty using the material given for homework.” Share your observations with your child. For example, perhaps your child squints when reading, has difficulty turning the pages of a book or using digital materials, or re-reads a text passage multiple times. Ask your child questions that help you understand their experience with the material. If you suspect the materials aren’t working for your child, the next step is to talk with your child’s teacher(s).

By phone or in an email to the teacher(s), share your observations and the conversations you’ve had with your child. Be as descriptive as possible. Ask the teacher(s) if they’ve noticed your child having difficulty with any materials at school. If not, ask the teacher(s) to pay close attention to your child’s use of materials in the coming days. Request a meeting so you can discuss your concerns. If your child has an IEP or 504 plan, that education team should come together for such a meeting. At a minimum, the meeting should include you, your child, one or more of your child’s teachers, and any specialist(s) who can help identify the difficulty your child may be having. Examples of specialists are physical therapists, occupational therapists, teachers of students with visual impairments, teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, and reading or literacy specialists.

Your child has an important role in this meeting: to share their experience. You and your child’s teacher(s) can discuss your observations of your child in this meeting. From all the information shared, the specialist may be able to provide additional insights. By the end of the meeting, the team should reach one of the following conclusions:

1. **The difficulty your child is having is not due to the educational materials.** The team thinks something else is getting in the way of your child's learning, and your child does not need AEM.
2. **Certain educational materials are difficult for your child to use.** For example, the team notices when print materials are used, your child struggles. If the same information is provided to your child in a different format, the team thinks your child will do better in school. This is an indication that AEM is needed.
3. **Your child struggles to understand the content, rather than to use the format.** The team thinks the issue may be related to the reading level or complexity of the materials rather than the way information is presented.
4. **More information is needed to determine if your child needs AEM.** The team decides to gather more information before reaching a conclusion.

If the team determines your child needs AEM, the next step is to decide which format(s) would be best and related supports your child will need. If your child already has an IEP or 504 plan, the information about their current program/plan will help this process

Summary

It's common for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, are blind or have low vision, have physical disabilities, or have learning disabilities to find difficulty using or learning from the educational materials provided in school. As a parent or caregiver of a student who may need AEM, you play a vital role in bringing this need to the attention of teachers. A process of decision making is available to ensure students who need AEM receive them in a timely manner.

Recommended Citation

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