

Accommodations grant students equal opportunity to represent their intelligence

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T T I N

I shuffle through the pages of the math test in front of me. The sleek, white paper is filled with pencil scratches and eraser marks. The words seem to blend together, making the page essentially illegible. The variables in the equations appear to switch from x to y and back to x. It's time to turn in my test, but I know that I will get it back to finish on my own time after school. The bell rings in the background, notifying all my fellow test-takers they better wrap up.

Instead of walking to the turn-in tray like the other members of my class, I walk to hand my test directly to the teacher and assure him I will finish the exam after school. I overhear his conversation with the girl who usually sits next to me. "This isn't fair. Why does she get extra time and I don't?" He tells her that he can't offer her this accommodation because it would be unfair. She leaves class frustrated, and so do I.

This girl and I aren't exactly in the same boat. Even if I study for weeks in advance and know the material by heart, I will still struggle to finish any math test within a 50-minute class period. For her, this is a one-time need, but for me it is a constant.

As students of an elite, nationally-ranked school, we tend to forget there is a difference between the incapability to finish one test and the incapability to finish every test no matter the class or subject. People assume these are the same, but they couldn't be more different.

The question is: is she really struggling with processing and interpreting the questions on the test, or did she just not know the material enough to finish in time?

I was diagnosed with Dyslexia in the third grade, but I started to struggle with finishing math tests when I was in seventh grade and taking Pre-Algebra. A week into the course, I switched to Pre-AP math because on-level was proving to move too slow for me. In Pre-AP, I understood everything that was happening, but the tests were killing me. On all the learning checks, I received relatively high grades, but those were never more than two questions. My homework almost perfectly matched the key, but my test grades were not reflecting the amount of work I was putting into the class.

My teacher was kind enough to let all the students that didn't finish their tests come back after school. Unlike anyone else, I was having to go back for every test. For the first time in my life, math was difficult. I quickly grew to hate math more than anything, and I had an average far lower than I ever had before. I was convinced that algebra and I just weren't friends — but really algebra is my favorite subject.

After this habit of not finishing tests persisted, I was worried that I needed to move back to on-level math. I knew I would have a grade far higher than my C average, but the class would bore me to death. This is when I learned that I needed extended time.

Like any accommodation, extended time is allotted to students with learning disabilities or impairments to allow them to have an adequate opportunity to prove their knowledge. According to Assistant Principal and 504 school coordinator Chad Burnett, the accommodation is given in one of four ways: through a 504 plan, through special educa-

tion, through an appointed school professional or to students who have a temporary struggle (ex: a student with a concussion).

Everyone learns differently; this is not debatable. People have different talents and different strengths, making each person's learning experience specific. Westlake has Pre-AP, AP, on-level and special education classes to help students reach their full potential. In the workforce, we don't compare lawyers to nurses or musicians, so why would we compare visual learners to auditory learners? Every student is successful in their own way and will all make it out of high school. So, why is it unfair for some students to take a different "route" to have success in the classroom?

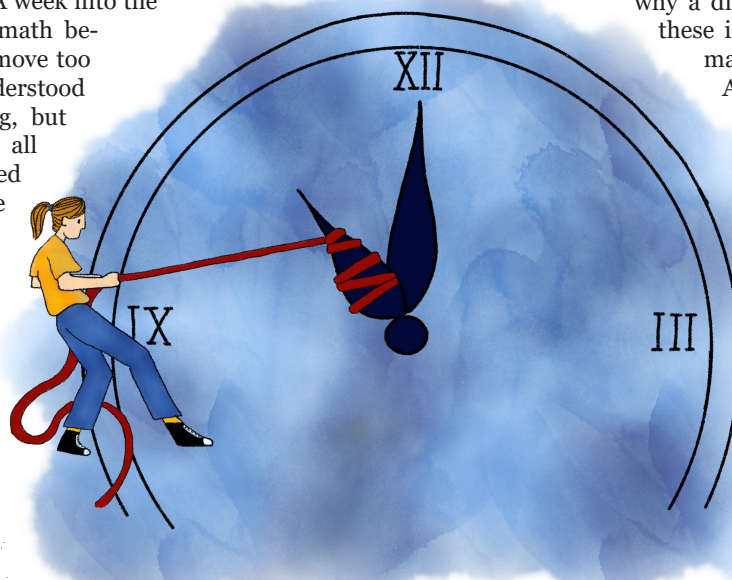
We don't question why a blind student needs a cane or why a disabled person needs a wheelchair because these impairments are visible. Dyslexia is one of many disabilities called "invisible disabilities".

A hidden or "invisible" disability is something someone struggles with that can't immediately be seen. ADHD, Dysgraphia, Anxiety and Depression are just a few of these common disabilities that fall under this umbrella term. Hidden disabilities are easy to question because there isn't enough visual evidence to prove someone does or does not suffer from these disorders.

Not all students who suffer from hidden disabilities need or qualify for educational accommodations, but accommodations exist to help this group of students. Medical accommodations exist but are not distributed through a 504 the same way an educational accommodation is.

The goal for educational accommodations is to remove barriers in the learning process. I would refer to extended testing time as allowing students the time necessary to appropriately show their level of understanding of the content. Without extended testing time, grades are lowered and some would fail even though they know the material. Accommodations can also be thought of as leveling the playing field so that all students can compete to reach the top 10 percent if they want, achieve a five on any AP exam, pass the SAT and get into a good college, regardless of any dividing factors.

An accommodation is a booster seat in the grand scheme of things. It's a journey from below grade-level to grade-level. Once a student grows out of the need for one, it is removed from their file the same way a



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SEED OR NINE

child goes from a booster seat to riding shotgun.

Accommodations can range anywhere from timeliness, to concentration, to verbal test taking, to simplifying written instructions or extended test time.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of the 2017-18 school year, 14 percent of all students ages three to 21 in the public school system received special services.

As a student who receives extra time and other accommodations considered “unfair,” my opinion is rather obvious. I believe that extended test time is used to create adequate opportunities for all students.

Extended test time refers to the possible one-and-a-half time, double time or even more time than that, that some students need. One-and-a-half time means that if the class gets 50 minutes for any given exam, this accommodation gives students an additional 25 minutes. For double time, it would be the allotted time times two. More time than that can be given to students who need the entire test to be read aloud or on other case-by-case basis.

I fall under the category of students who need one-and-a-half time on any math-related quiz or test. This year, I have this accommodation in Pre-AP Algebra 2 and Pre-AP Chemistry 1. I have the classified learning disorder Dyslexia, so I have various accommodations that allow me to take advanced classes that cater to my classroom needs.

I don't need extended time with my other classes like Pre-AP English 2, World History, AP Art History and Spanish 3. It would be unfair for me, “a classified student,” to receive extended time when I don't need it.

On math and chemistry tests, the teacher hands me one page at a time. Once I completely finish a page, I receive another, and so on. If the teachers feel that there isn't enough time left in class for me to start and finish another page, I will complete it that day after school in the testing center. My accommodation doesn't allow me to push back the test date — I am still required to finish the test within 24 hours of starting.

People tend to question why I need extended time in math when my hidden disorder, Dyslexia, relates to reading. I explain it as math being another language. To understand the language of math, I have to be able to translate word questions — which are in English — to numbers back to English. The process takes my mind an excessive amount of time to translate.

Sometimes, numbers like to play tricks on me the same way that letters do. In my work, the number three turns into an eight and sixes

How to apply for accommodations:

Step #1:

If the temporary accommodations are not working, refer student to the Student Support Team and provide all documentation to SST.

Step #2:

Teacher adds temporary accommodations and documents outcomes. If the student needs extra support go to step #3.

Step #3: Data Collection

- Parent Information Form
- Gen. Ed. Teacher information form
- Student interview
- Student observation
- Medical documentation
- Student data (attendance, grades, etc.)

Step #4: Student Support Meeting

Depending on the decision of the SST either:

- Watch and check in with them
- Provide short-term plan to teachers
- Conduct an initial 504 Review of FIE for Special Education services

Step #5: Meeting Follow-Up

Meetings to determine if:

- No interventions/accommodations are needed
- Short term interventions/accommodations plan is needed
- Student needs to move to Tier 3 Interventions and a 504 or SPED evaluation is needed at this time

Step #6: Annual Reviews conducted

The student support plans are reviewed annually for adjustments

***Speak to AP Chad Burnett for any clarification**

magically turn into nines. When the curriculum started including variables like p, q, b and d, my mind got even more lost, and I was losing partial credit on nearly every question.

My handwriting isn't illegible, but sometimes it seems that way because all the numbers and letters morph into this mega constant that confuses me.

Extended time allows me to go through each question at a very slow pace to make sure the numbers and letters that seem identical in my head — the head of a Dyslexic — will make sense to my teachers when they grade the test. The need for extended time does not alter my intelligence, it just changes my path to success.

I have been considered an “accommodated student,” since sixth grade. Before then, I had to be taken out of class for various reading comprehension groups. For fourth and fifth grade, I participated in the Scottish Rite Hospital for Children's Dyslexia program: “Take Flight: A Comprehensive Intervention for Students with Dyslexia.”

The application process requires a learning disorder — or hidden disability — diagnosis. Teacher input is also required. They must state that the students need accommodations or that they are struggling in the classroom.

In the end, accommodations don't provide students with an unfair advantage, they just provide equal opportunities. We all have something unique to contribute at Westlake, and we should take pride in this rather than question what's fair and what's not.

—Ava Valdés