

PALS and Students with Special Needs

Including Students with Disabilities or English Language Learners

How does the administration of PALS address the need to individualize the assessment for children who have special needs, such as a disability or limited English proficiency?

PALS is designed to be flexible, responsive, and accessible to meet the wide range of needs of students. Most students who have special needs can access PALS through **standard administration**, sometimes with the aid of one or more of the allowable practices or accommodations listed below. If modifications are required, resulting in **nonstandard administration**, the PALS Online System provides a mechanism for entering these scores as well.

What is the difference between "allowable practices," "accommodations," and "modifications"?

Allowable practices are practices that do not change the construct being measured and do not require documentation in an IEP (Individualized Education Plan). They may be used with any student during PALS administration, regardless of whether or not the student is an English Language Learner or has a disability, if the practice is found to be helpful in reducing student frustration and/or determining a student's true literacy knowledge and abilities. While the use of allowable practices with a student who has a disability does not require an IEP team meeting or IEP documentation, any of them might be included in an IEP to ensure that the practice is continued during future administrations. **Use of any of the following allowable practices still constitutes standard administration of PALS:**

- Multiple testing sessions
- Breaks between tasks
- Scheduling assessment for optimal times
- One-on-one administration, even for tasks where group administration is allowed
- Group administration in a smaller group or quieter setting than other groups
- Assessing in an alternative location (e.g. special education room, library, etc.)
- Repeating directions, repeating practice items
- Students repeat directions, checking for understanding

Note that there are no time limits for any of the PALS tasks.

Accommodations also do not change the construct being measured, but allow some students with disabilities equitable access to the material being presented or help to alleviate stress for some English Language Learners. Accommodations should be consistent with day-to-day instructional methods, and are usually documented in a student's IEP if one exists. Below are examples of accommodations that may be used for students with special needs without risk of invalidating PALS scores. **Use of any of the following accommodations still constitutes standard administration of PALS:**

- Visual aid (e.g., ruler, magnifier)
- Auditory aid (e.g., FM system, sound field system)
- *For English Language Learners:* Explaining in the student's native language, before the assessment begins, that the teacher will be asking the student in English to perform some tasks in English, that the student need only to do his/her best, and that this will help the teacher know what to teach next.

Modifications change what is being assessed and result in a nonstandard administration; the data gathered will be useful for diagnosis and progress monitoring but no longer valid for screening purposes. The use of modifications are considered by a student's IEP team only when further support is needed than the allowable practices or existing accommodations provide, and it is determined either that (1) a modification of a task would provide more accurate information about what the student truly knows, or (2) one or more of the required screening tasks may not be appropriate for the student due to a disability (see below for more information about using PALS with English Language Learners). Modifications are documented in the student's IEP, and should be consistent with day-to-day instructional methods rather than introduced for the first time during assessment. Modifications may be used to obtain information to guide instructional planning (diagnostic and progress monitoring information) rather than for screening; *the benchmarks will not be applied. The student's scores will show up on individual student reports, but not on group reports.* See below for examples of modifications that may be used for students with disabilities, as determined by the individual student's IEP team. **Use of any of the following modifications constitute nonstandard administration of PALS:**

- Assistive technology for non-verbal students
- Braille text and altered instructions
- American Sign Language and altered instructions
- Use of a scribe
- Allowing non-verbal students to identify letters of the alphabet by pointing rather than vocalizing

How does an IEP team determine whether there is a need for accommodations or modifications for a student with a disability who will be assessed using PALS?

If a student only requires allowable practices, there is no need for an IEP meeting and no IEP documentation is required. IEP teams should always consider allowable practices first, which are available to all students, before consideration of accommodations or modifications. Because PALS is a tool to guide instruction, accommodations and modifications are considered supplementary aids, services, and supports provided to or on behalf of the student. Any accommodations and modifications used during a PALS administration should be consistent with those that are provided during a student's daily instruction and generally should not be introduced for the first time during assessment.

If an IEP team determines that there is a need for accommodations or modifications beyond the use of allowable practices, where is this documented in the IEP?

Allowable practices do not need to be documented in the IEP. Accommodations and modifications beyond allowable practices may be documented on I-9, IEP Summary, Supplementary Aids and Services. Supplementary aids and services include frequency and amount, and are stated so that the level of the LEA's commitment of resources is clear to parents and other IEP team members. The statement should be appropriate to the specific service, and stated in a manner that can be understood by all involved in developing and implementing the IEP. Keep in mind teachers who administer PALS to this student in the future will need to know how to administer PALS in a way that's consistent with past administrations of PALS, so that progress can be monitored accurately.

Because PALS is a tool for instructional purposes, it is not necessary to include documentation specific to PALS on I-7, IEP Participation in Statewide Assessments.

How can I tell whether a support practice from the IEP is considered an “accommodation” or a “modification” for PALS?

A good rule of thumb is that if the teacher can still read to the student the administration prompts in bold print as written in the Administration and Scoring Guide, then it is probably still standard administration. If the teacher is telling the student to do something different than how it is worded in the instructions (e.g., “point to...” rather than “say...”), then it is considered nonstandard administration. If you have questions about whether an administration practice constitutes standard administration, please contact our PALS literacy specialists.

When is it appropriate to use PALS with English Language Learners?

The English version of PALS is designed to assess what a student knows about reading and spelling in English. Once a child’s level of proficiency in English is such that any data can be collected using an English language assessment, then PALS may be used to obtain baseline data about the child’s literacy knowledge, to determine areas of strength and need to help inform instruction, and to measure progress as the child moves forward and continues to receive literacy instruction in English. In these cases, it should be noted that below-benchmark scores may be due to language acquisition issues rather than to a reading difficulty, and that a literacy screening tool in the child’s native language may help to discern the difference and guide the approach to intervention. If the student’s literacy instruction is in another language, it may be more appropriate to use an assessment in that language. (PALS español may be used for this purpose if the student’s native language is Spanish.)

Who administers PALS to students who have special needs due to a disability or to a developing English proficiency?

PALS is a tool for planning a student’s reading and literacy instruction. Ideally, the person who plans this student’s literacy instruction is the one to administer PALS, as this person is most likely to interpret the data accurately and use it immediately for instruction.

Most students with special needs who are placed in the least restrictive environment with access to general education curriculum and standards will receive their reading and literacy instruction in the regular education setting. Classroom teachers who are primarily responsible for literacy instruction should administer PALS to all of their students, including students with disabilities or English Language Learners whose literacy instruction happens in their classroom.

In some unique situations, such as when a child is only in a special education setting for instruction, it may be reasonable for a special education teacher to administer PALS either alone or collaboratively with the classroom teacher, in accordance with accommodations and modifications specified in the IEP.