National Center on
Accessible Educational Materials

A Family's Guide to Accessible Educational Materials

By National AEM Center at CAST

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IDEAs
that Work
Office of Special
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Purpose

Families play an important role in ensuring their child with a disability has access to the educational materials they need to learn and succeed. This guide is designed for parents and caregivers of children who require accessible educational materials (AEM) for learning. It will provide you with information about what AEM are, how they can benefit your child, and how you can work with your child's teachers and education team to make sure your child receives the AEM they need.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the nation's special education law that gives you and your child certain rights and protections in the special education process. The IDEA requires that students with disabilities who need AEM receive them in a timely manner. This means school districts must take reasonable steps to provide AEM to eligible students with disabilities without delay. This guide was created to help families learn:

- What AEM are;
- Why a student may need AEM;
- Laws related to a student's right to receive AEM
- How AEM are provided to students;
- What supports are necessary to effectively use them; and
- Next steps for parents/caregivers of students who need AEM

With this knowledge, families can help ensure their child with a disability has access to the materials they need for independence, participation, and progress in general education classes.

What are AEM?

A typical barrier for some students with disabilities is actually the educational materials used for learning, like textbooks, handouts, and websites. Barriers can happen because many materials aren't designed to be flexible and usable for all learners. For example, a print textbook assumes a student can hold the book and turn its pages, see the information on the pages, and read the text with fluency. Digital materials that aren't designed with learner variability in mind can cause similar types of barriers.

This is why accessible educational materials, or AEM, are so important. AEM are designed to be flexible and usable from the beginning, or they can be created by adapting a material to match the needs of the student.

- Some examples of AEM are:

- Print materials provided in braille, large print, audio, or digital text.
- Captioning of video provides the text of what is spoken and other sounds in the video.
- Transcripts of audio materials provide the information in text.
- Audio description in a video provides a verbal explanation of the onscreen action when no sound is happening.

Note that all of the above examples show how AEM provides the same information, just in a different way. The goal of AEM is to make sure the information is provided in a way the student can use and learn it.

What Laws Relate to My Child's Right to Receive AEM?

There are two U.S. laws that relate to AEM. These are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

The IDEA ensures children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that meets their needs. The IDEA requires schools to provide special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities, which may include AEM.

Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities that receive federal funding, such as public schools. Section 504 also requires schools to provide FAPE to eligible students with disabilities, which may include AEM.

According to both the IDEA and Section 504, schools must ensure students who need AEM receive them in a timely manner so they can participate and progress in their education. This means schools must identify students who need AEM, evaluate their needs, provide appropriate AEM in a timely manner, and monitor their use and effectiveness.

Think My Child Needs AEM. How are AEM Provided?

AEM are provided to students who require them through a collaborative process that involves the student, their parents, teachers, and other relevant professionals. Examples of collaborations include IEP teams, 504 plan teams, and multi-tier system of support (MTSS), formerly known as response-to-intervention (RTI), teams. During the collaborative meeting, decisions will be made related to the student's need for AEM. Parents and caregivers can support the process of providing AEM by following these steps in collaboration with the school team:

Step 1: Find out if your child needs AEM.

Do you sometimes wonder if the materials provided to your child in school are causing learning barriers? To find out if your child needs more accessible materials, consult with their teachers and school staff. They can use a variety of student data, including assessments, evaluations, parent/caregiver and teacher observations, and student feedback to start the decision-making process. Parents, caregivers, and educators can work together to support the child and their needs in various ways.

When working with a team to determine your child's need for AEM, it is crucial to review the student data, which provides useful and relevant information regarding your child's strengths and needs in relation to educational materials.

If the data shows your child can read and engage with the same text-based instructional materials provided and used by all students, then AEM are not needed. In this case, your child will continue to participate in the classroom with strategies and supports provided to all learners through classroom instruction.

If the data shows your child is having difficulty reading and accessing the text-based materials provided and used by all students, then the team needs to discuss whether or not your child will make more progress if the exact same information is provided to them in another form or way. If it is anticipated your child will make adequate progress if they're provided the new form of materials, then AEM are needed and the team will move to step 2 in the decision-making process.

Step 2: Select the most suitable AEM for your child.

Depending on your child's needs, they may benefit from AEM. For instance, some students with visual impairments may use both braille and audio, while others may use large print and digital text. Before you and your child's team choose the best AEM for your child, it is important to identify their specific needs and preferences. This will help the team understand the full context of your child's needs and preferences for learning. Different types of AEM may have different advantages and disadvantages depending on your child's learning preferences, goals, and challenges. For example, some students may need large print to reduce eye strain and fatigue, while others may benefit from digital text that can be customized with different fonts, colors, and magnification levels. Learning disabilities also impact students in different ways. Some may need digital text with text-to-speech for materials provided in all subjects, while others prefer digital text for science subjects and human-narrated audio files for other class subjects. Therefore, it is essential to involve your child in the decision-making process and consider their input and feedback. It is also encouraged to allow the learner to try different formats

such as tactile, large print, audio, or digital formats to find the most suitable and comfortable format for their learning. The team will then consider all the information collected to reflect on the following questions.

- What formats and features are most useful to the student?
- Does the usefulness of certain features vary by subject matter?
- How might different learning environments impact the usefulness of certain formats?
- How comfortable and confident is your child with using each type of material? Do they need any additional training or support?

By answering these questions, your child's decision-making team can narrow down the options and select the best fit for your child.

Step 3: Obtain the materials in the format(s) needed.

There are various sources that provide accessible materials for your child. Some of them are open to everyone, while others may have eligibility criteria. By collaborating and communicating with the staff and school team members, you can help the team find the best options for your child. For example, Bookshare is a free online library that offers accessible ebooks in different formats for students with print disabilities. Louis Database is a national database of accessible materials from the American Printing House for the Blind. You can search for books, magazines, and other materials that are available in braille, large print, audio, and electronic file formats. These are just some of the sources you can explore with your child's school team to ensure they have access to the materials they need.

For more information on how to access different formats of learning materials, visit the [AEM Center's Acquiring Accessible Formats webpage](#), where you will find a variety of helpful information and resources.

Step 4: Identify what supports are needed to help you, your child, and school staff effectively understand how to use the selected AEM.

Students require different types of support to use AEM effectively. The IEP team should determine whether any of the following supports are needed for a student to effectively use the selected AEM:

Assistive technology (AT):

These are devices or software programs that allow for access and interaction with AEM. For example, text-to-speech, magnification, screen readers, audio players, refreshable

braille displays, and switch technology are common tools used by students who need materials in a different format.

Training:

This refers to the instruction and practice that students, their parents/caregivers, and educators need when learning how to use AEM and related AT. Training can be provided by a combination of specialists and self-directed learning resources. When mutually agreeable, students may also benefit from learning from peers who use similar supports and accommodations.

Instructional strategies:

These are the methods and techniques that educators use to support students in making effective use of AEM and related AT. The right instructional strategies are designed to make sure students who use materials through a different format are learning from them. For example, students who use braille materials, digital materials, materials provided through audio recordings, etc.

Accommodations:

These are the changes or adjustments that are made to the learning conditions or environment to support a student's use of AEM and related AT. For example, providing extra time for a student to complete a task, particularly while learning to use the materials in the new format.

By identifying and providing the appropriate support for using AEM, educators can help students achieve their academic goals and improve their learning outcomes. To further explore what actions need to be taken to ensure your child who needs AEM receives them in a timely manner, read the AEM Center: Decision-Making & Accessible Formats.

I Think My Child May Need AEM. What are My Next Steps?

When materials used in school aren't working for your child, there are ways for those materials to be fixed. This section will provide you with some resources and templates you can use to help you take the next steps if you think your child may need AEM to remove barriers to some of the educational materials they're provided in school.

Sample Questions to Ask:

Before you request accessible formats for your child, it is helpful to know who to ask and what to ask for. There are many different people who can assist you in this process, such as teachers, special educators, school administrators, librarians, and technology

specialists. Here are some questions you might consider asking the different team members as you begin to move forward with your next steps.

Your child:

- What are some of the challenges or frustrations you have when reading?
- How do you cope with these challenges or frustrations?
- What are some of the differences you experience when using printed text and digital text?
- What kind of help do you need when using print and digital texts?
- What would make reading more effective for you?

Your child's teacher(s):

- What kinds of materials and resources help my child enjoy the process of reading?
- How do you make sure the materials and resources used for reading match my child's needs and preferences and are effective for them to use?
- What are some of the things my child does well with or struggles with in reading?
- How does my child participate and learn from the curriculum materials and activities?
- What are the current supports and adjustments my child gets or needs to help with reading or using materials?
- Is my child able to adequately participate and progress in class with the traditional materials provided?
- How can I find out if my child can benefit from AEM?
- Can we meet to discuss if my child has a need for AEM?

Student Profiles:

To help us better understand the need for accessible formats, let's take a look at some student profiles:

Tosha

Tosha is a 10-year-old girl who attends the fifth grade at an elementary school. She enjoys playing soccer, video games, and spending time with her friends. She is curious, creative, and has a good sense of humor. Tosha has been diagnosed with dyslexia, a reading disability that affects her ability to decode words, comprehend text, and spell accurately. She reads below grade level when not provided materials that are accessible and meet her learning needs. She also has difficulty with writing assignments that require her to produce or respond to prompts presented in text only.

Tosha has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that specifies her need for AEM to support her learning. Tosha uses audiobooks and digital text with text-to-speech.

Tosha's teachers and parents work together to ensure she receives the appropriate AEM and accommodations for her learning needs. They monitor her progress and adjust her instruction accordingly. They also encourage her to advocate for her needs and preferences.

John

John is a ninth-grade student who has a lot of creativity and a strong interest in math and science. He enjoys exploring new ideas and learning new things, and he often shows enthusiasm in class discussions and activities. However, John also faces some challenges that affect his academic performance and his self-esteem. He has difficulty with attention, organization, planning, time management, reading comprehension, writing, and self-regulation. He sometimes gets distracted, loses track of his assignments, forgets deadlines, struggles to understand what he reads, writes poorly organized essays, and has trouble controlling his impulses and emotions. These challenges make him feel frustrated, discouraged, and unmotivated.

With support from his caregivers and education team, John has some goals he wants to achieve in order to improve his academic skills and his confidence. He wants to learn how to focus better, organize his work, plan his tasks, manage his time, comprehend what he reads, write more effectively, and regulate his behavior. He also wants to feel more positive about himself and his abilities and to have more fun and satisfaction in learning.

To help John reach his goals, he receives some support and accommodations that are tailored to his needs and preferences through an IEP. He uses digital text with text-to-speech, which allows him to listen to the text while he reads along. He also uses audiobooks for some of his reading assignments, which helps him improve his vocabulary and comprehension. With the use of his accessible materials, John is able to engage and interact with the content with an increased level of comprehension and understanding. Additionally, by having the content provided in a way that reduces barriers to reading comprehension, John is able to maintain longer periods of focus during reading activities.

Juan

Juan is a curious and friendly fifth-grader who loves to learn new things. He is blind and has received braille instruction since second grade. He enjoys reading books, playing chess, and listening to music in his free time. He has a good sense of humor and likes

to make his classmates laugh. Juan is also very interested in science and mathematics and wants to become an engineer when he grows up. According to the most recent evaluation data reviewed by the team, including formative and standardized assessments, Juan understands grade-level content but requires continued instruction in braille and tactile graphics, particularly for science and mathematics content. He is developmentally proficient with the screen reader software on his school-issued MacBook, which is the same device provided to all students in the fourth and fifth grades at his school. Juan participates in all general education classes while receiving braille instruction from his Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TVI).

Juan needs embossed braille, tactile graphics, and image descriptions for math and science materials and a combination of Braille Ready Format (BRF) files and audio for other subjects. He also needs audio descriptions on videos.

Alie

Alie is a first-grader who loves to read, draw, and play with her friends. She has cerebral palsy, which affects her motor skills, movement, and balance. According to the most recent evaluation data reviewed by the team, including formative and standardized assessments, Alie understands grade-level content. She uses a wheelchair and receives therapy and speech & language services. Alie requires assistance with holding and manipulating print materials and using her school-issued iPad, which is the same device provided to all students in her K-3 school. Alie participates in all general education classes and is supported by a paraprofessional.

Alie needs a combination of accessible digital text and audio materials for all of her subjects.

Ensuring access for all learners is not just the right thing to do, it is also required under the law.

Summary

When students receive AEM in a timely manner, they are more likely to increase their independence, participation, and progress in the general curriculum and meet their individualized goals.

As parents and caregivers, you have a key role in supporting your children's access to AEM in a timely manner. We encourage you to share this guide with other families, educators, and professionals who work with students with disabilities. Together, we can make education more accessible and inclusive for all learners.

Appendix

Sample Emails

The templates below are provided to help you email teachers if you think your child might need accessible formats. Feel free to modify them as needed to suit your child's situation and goals.

Parent/Caregiver to Teacher

Email Template

Dear <insert teacher name>,

My name is <insert name> and I am the parent of <insert student name>. I have noticed my child is having a hard time using the reading materials provided at home and I would like the opportunity to discuss my child's ability to use the reading materials in class and keep up with the pace of the class instruction. I am wondering if there might be a need to consider accessible materials and would like to meet with you to discuss this further. Please let me know when would be a good time to talk with you further.

Sincerely,

<insert parent name>

Parent/Caregiver Observation Form:

The purpose of this form is to help you notice your child's strengths and preferences when using print-and digital-text materials. This form will guide you through some key aspects to observe and will invite you to record your positive feedback and comments.

Visual Representation and Perception of Text

Check the box if the characteristic represents your child's behavior.

- ☐ Shows interest in objects, faces, colors, or details at a distance or close-up
- ☐ Adjusts eyesight by squinting, blinking, rubbing, or closing one eye as needed
- ☐ Uses head tilting, turning, or holding books or other objects at comfortable distances
- ☐ Tracks moving objects or locates stationary objects with ease
- ☐ Manages eye fatigue, headaches, or dizziness after reading or other visual tasks
- ☐ Enjoys reading, writing, drawing, or other activities that require visual focus

- ☐ Demonstrates good eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, or spatial awareness
- ☐ Follows a line of text visually with accuracy
- ☐ Moves eyes at the pace the text is being read aloud with fluency

Physically Manipulating Text

Check the box if the characteristics represent your child's behavior

- ☐ Holds objects such as a pencil, pen, or marker with confidence
- ☐ Turns pages or flips through a book with ease
- ☐ Maintains neck control for extended periods of time with comfort
- ☐ Engages in tasks that involve text and books with enthusiasm
- ☐ Holds a book for extended amounts of time with stability

Open Observations

Record any additional observations you would like to share with your child's teacher about their strengths and preferences when using print- and digital-text materials.

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

To download a blank copy of this form, click on the [Parent Observation form](#).

Reach out to your state's Parent Information Center

Email:

The template below can be used to reach out to your state's Parent Information Center to inquire about how you can partner with them to better understand ways to support your child and their needs.

Template A:

Dear Parent Information Center,

I am writing to you as a parent of a student who is struggling with the typical materials provided as part of the general curriculum. I would like to request your support and guidance in better understanding what supports are available and how I can access these resources and services for my child.

I would appreciate it if you could provide me with some information on how you might support me in better understanding this process.

I look forward to hearing from you and learning more about how I can support my child's education. Please reply to this email or contact me at (phone number) to schedule a meeting or a phone call.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,
(Parent name)

Template B:

Dear Parent Information Center,

I am writing to inquire about the ways you can support me with my child's learning needs. My child is in the <insert grade level> grade and has been struggling with reading and writing skills.

I have heard that your center offers various resources and workshops for parents of children with specific learning needs. I am interested in learning more about these opportunities and how I can access them. Could you please send me some information about the types of support you provide and how I can register for them?

I appreciate your time and attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
<Your name>

Resources to Explore:

- [Find your Parent Information & Resource Center](#): Each state has a Parent Information & Resource Center. These centers perform a variety of direct services for children and youth with disabilities, families, professionals, and other organizations that support them.

- [AEM Center: What is Accessibility?](): Explore the meaning of accessibility. Watch an [Intro to Accessibility video]() to hear how accessibility impacts learners of all ages.
- [AEM Center: Access to Learning](): Explore how the use of accessible digital materials and technologies strengthens opportunities for all learners to experience independence, participation, and progress.
- [AEM Center: Decision-Making & Accessible Formats](): Read more about the multi-step decision-making process that can be used to help determine the need for accessible formats.

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