



Special Education Needs Policy

I. Purpose

The purpose of this document is to establish a workable and meaningful policy addressing how Desert Academy serves students with learning differences. Our intent is for this policy to both honor our mission and embody our commitment to the International Baccalaureate Learner Profile Traits – most especially, those of caring and principled behavior. To encapsulate our mission, Desert Academy is dedicated to academic and personal excellence and to valuing the individual, building character and promoting self-confidence. Critical to accomplishing these goals is our focus on serving students whose learning differences might affect their self-confidence, socialization, and ability to learn. Our purpose as a learning institution is to help all of our students gain a strong understanding of their unique learning styles and individual goals, as well as how best to attain them.

II. Philosophy:

Our philosophy as a school is to work towards the inclusion of all students in a highly differentiated learning environment that can meet a wide variety of needs. Because we are an institution dedicated to teaching tolerance and inclusivity, this philosophy flows naturally out of all we do. What happens in our classrooms is an extension of that overarching construct, the idea of principled and caring behavior.

Desert Academy aligns with the International Baccalaureate Organization in its commitment to providing all candidates with equal opportunities to demonstrate their ability under assessment conditions that are as equitable as possible. Wherever Diploma Program students could be at a disadvantage as a result of special educational needs, we endeavor to provide special arrangements and learning support, whether this is necessary on a short- or long-term basis. Additionally, we advocate for our students with all testing organizations, as appropriate, including the ACT, SAT, and IBO, to insure that

their needs are met with regard to extra time, breaks, technological access, etc.

The guiding principles of our learning program are supported by the core value that our students, regardless of learning challenges, are entitled to full access to a curriculum that meets their needs and desires. We seek to engage our students in advocacy on their own behalf, to empower them to ask questions and to seek answers that will affect the trajectory of their lives. At Desert Academy, we provide a microcosm of the larger world around us. We believe that empowering our students with learning differences will help them to understand that the larger world, just like this community, is enriched by our diversity and the varied ways each of us functions within it.

III. Mission

Desert Academy is dedicated to academic and personal excellence. We provide a quality college preparatory education in a diverse school community which values individuality, builds character, promotes self-confidence, and fosters global understanding.

IV. Review & Communication

We review our policy as it relates to our general mission on an as-needed basis and at least every five years. Parties to the discussion and evaluation of the policy are our Learning Advocate and the Director of Student Life, who provides our counseling services, our Assistant Head of School, DP and MYP Coordinators, our Head of School and our Executive Director of Operations. All of our policies related to learning, as well as any updates to them, are directly communicated to our Trustees, faculty, students and their families via our Student-Parent Handbook, our website and newsletters.

V. Identification, Assessment & Provisions

At Desert Academy, we approach a student's learning, mental wellbeing, and our ability to help him or her grow both academically and psychologically through comprehensive and collaborative modalities.

- Identification: The process begins during Admissions with a review and analysis of all documentation received for each incoming student, including

educational and psychological evaluations. This is followed by discussions with previous teachers and mentors and meetings with parents/guardians and with the student. We also observe the student in each of his or her classes, in order to gain the fullest possible perspective, enabling us to assess the specific needs of the student and how we can best meet them. Further classroom observations and individual meetings with the student – during which the student is assessed for executive functioning and general processing abilities - enable our Learning Advocate to make a deeper analysis of the student’s particular needs.

- Recommendations and Referrals: Depending on the necessities of the case, the DP Coordinator, the Director of Student Life and the Learning Advocate formulate recommendations as deemed applicable. These may include referrals for psychological or educationally based evaluations, individual or family-based treatment, tutoring (in school or outside), psychiatric services, visual or hearing assessments, and occupational or medical assessments.

- Provisions:

Desert Academy does all that is reasonable to insure that any student with a learning difference can access the full range of educational opportunities available within our Diploma Program.

- *Issues for Consideration:*

a. We seek to address specific learning issues, language and communication disorders related to comprehension and processing (reading, writing, spelling or manipulating numbers) including dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and aphasia.

b. We also consider social, emotional and behavioral issues such as ADHD, autistic spectrum disorders, psychosocial disorders, school phobia, anxiety disorders, emotional distress in a candidate’s life, and uncooperative behaviors, as well as physical and medical conditions including auditory and visual processing conditions and sensory processing issues, heart disease, epilepsy, asthma, diabetes, allergies, etc.

VI. Process:

The severity of diagnosis and current functioning informs decisions related to acceptance and retention in our academic programs and, ultimately, the plan created for the young person to facilitate her or his academic and social success. For a student coming to Desert with recent educational testing showing precise learning challenges, our Learning Advocate works with our DP Coordinator to create an “Desert Individualized Learning Plan” or DILP. For students whose learning variations are discovered while in our care, we may use diagnostic results and recommendations, metrics, faculty and administrative input, and the expertise of our Learning Advocate and our Head of School to devise the DILP. Our Learning Advocate coordinates with the Diploma Program Coordinator to provide extra time and other accommodations (as needed) on internal and external exams, as applicable. These individualized plans, combined with more formal evaluations, enable many of our students to receive needed accommodations on standardized college entrance examinations, as well.

The DILP described above provides a detailed list of accommodations that relate directly to the student’s distinctive learning traits and growth potential. Plan effectiveness is continually monitored through meetings with the student, DP Coordinator, and Learning Advocate, and meetings with teachers and parents.

-Standardized Testing Accommodations:

Once a DILP is established and implemented successfully, the DP Coordinator works with teachers, the Learning Advocate, parents, and student to monitor its efficacy. Then, as the student approaches the time for taking standardized tests such as the ACT, SAT or DP exams, the Coordinator will obtain the family’s permission to request accommodations and will assist the Learning Advocate in submitting the necessary documentation for requests for accommodations during the tests. Once those accommodations are granted, the Coordinator will familiarize the student with them.

The DP Coordinator sends each student’s DILP to the IBO with completed Special Consideration (D1/D2) form to the IBO at the time of registration for the IB DP Examinations. Once IBO informs the Coordinator of the

parameters regarding the Special Consideration decision, the Coordinator shares that information with the student, parents, and teachers involved. During the May IB DP Exams, the DP Coordinator makes all necessary arrangements for said accommodations in compliance with the IBO's recommendations for special consideration and in collaboration with the invigilator for each exam the student will take.

VII. Staff Development:

Desert Academy includes professional development for faculty and staff around addressing learning differences and in its annual in-service agenda. The Learning Advocate and the Diploma Program Coordinator present information frequently at faculty meetings to support students to reach their potential with appropriate, incremental steps.

- Resources:

Desert Academy provides resources including links to the support areas within the Online Curriculum Center for Diploma Program faculty, as well as offering professional development around classroom differentiation. Our Learning Advocate spends time in each classroom supporting faculty in their work with students with learning differences, consulting as needed or requested. The Learning Advocate also meets with teachers individually to provide guidance and with parents to liaise between them and teachers as needed.

Desert Academy also works with a number of outside experts and frequently consults with them and refers families to them for additional support.