**Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE) scheme for 2024**

The document provides comprehensive instructions for schools regarding the Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE) scheme for 2024. It outlines the scheme's purpose, scope, and eligibility criteria for accommodations due to disabilities such as learning, hearing, visual, and physical difficulties. The document includes details on the application process, key features of the RACE scheme, types of accommodations available, and enhancements made to the scheme. It also addresses common issues with applications, quality assurance measures, and the role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in supporting schools with complex cases. Additionally, the document emphasizes the importance of fair access to examinations for students with special needs without compromising the assessment's integrity.

**Special Arrangements Before an Examination**

* Applications for special arrangements are submitted by schools on behalf of candidates with specific learning or physical disabilities. The application form includes detailed questions about the candidate's educational history, needs, and the nature of requested accommodations.
* The document emphasizes that accommodations are granted based on evidence that the candidate's ability to perform under standard examination conditions is impaired due to their disability. It clarifies that "slow learners" or candidates with a "mental handicap" are not eligible for certain types of special arrangements.
* There is a closing date for applications, but the system allows for late submissions up to and during the examination period due to practical reasons.

**Operation of the Scheme**

* The number of candidates availing of reasonable accommodations has seen a significant increase, with 28,000 candidates in 2023, up from 19,500 in 2019. This rise reflects an increased acknowledgment of the complexity in accommodating students' needs.
* The RACE scheme underwent substantial reforms in 2017, enhancing access and certainty for candidates, especially those with learning difficulties. The ongoing exploration of assistive technology use underscores a commitment to independent access to examinations.

**Key Features and Enhancements**

* Accommodations provided at the Junior Cycle are generally reactivated for the Leaving Certificate, subject to school confirmation of continuing need, streamlining the support process for students through their education.
* The scheme's categorization of 'Specific Learning Difficulty' has broadened to 'Learning Difficulty', adopting a needs-based approach to support, which aligns with the National Council for Special Education's advocacy.
* The role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has evolved to focus on training schools on the RACE scheme, providing advice for complex applications, and engaging in governance and quality assurance.

**Quality Assurance and Decision-Making**

* The document emphasizes a quality assurance program to ensure that applications for RACE have been appropriately made on behalf of candidates whose needs for accommodations have been accurately identified.
* The decision-making process involves the SEC reviewing applications from schools individually, with a quality assurance program in place to monitor and assist schools in compliance with the RACE scheme's requirements.

**Assistive Technology and Writing Accommodations**

* There's a notable emphasis on the role of assistive technology in enabling independent access to examinations, with the SEC considering applications for various forms of technology that do not compromise examination integrity.
* Clarity has been provided on writing accommodations, distinguishing between the use of a word processor, recording device, and access to a scribe, aiming to match accommodations closely with the student's needs and capabilities.

**Special Considerations and Appeals**

* The SEC and schools endeavour to accommodate candidates who experience emergencies or other traumas, with arrangements like rest breaks, special centres, or altered examination times to ensure candidates can participate as scheduled.
* An Independent Appeals process is offered for candidates or guardians dissatisfied with decisions, emphasizing the scheme's commitment to fairness and the opportunity for recourse.

This comprehensive approach detailed in the SEC 2024 document illustrates a robust framework designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their special educational needs, are afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in certificate examinations equitably.

**Special Arrangements Provided**

* **Time Adjustments:** Candidates may receive an allowance of 10 minutes extra time per hour if they are using a scribe, mechanical aid, or if they have a vision impairment.
* **Access to Questions:** Various means to facilitate access to exam questions include:
	+ Reading examination papers to the candidate without elaboration.
	+ Providing modified questions for those referring to visual materials.
	+ Offering braille translations.
	+ Supplying enlarged print in examination papers.
	+ Making available low vision aids for reading questions.
* **Presenting Responses:** Candidates can present their responses in several alternative ways:
	+ Recording answers on tape or using a word processor.
	+ Dictating answers to a scribe.
	+ Sending a script to a supervising examiner if reading difficulty arises.
* **Alternative Accommodation/Time Arrangements:** Includes options such as taking the examination in a special room or hospital and altering the examination time to accommodate special circumstances like attending a funeral.

**Special Consideration During and After an Examination**

* **Unforeseen Circumstances:** The Department acknowledges that illnesses, accidents, trauma, or bereavement can affect a candidate's performance. Arrangements can be made to help candidates complete their exams, including allowing exams to be taken at a later time during the same day in exceptional circumstances.

**Review of Submissions and Recommendations**

* The document highlights feedback from a variety of submissions, pointing out inadequacies in the current system and proposing improvements. Recommendations include:
	+ Discontinuing the requirement that a candidate's general ability be not below ‘the average range’ for special arrangements.
	+ Increasing awareness and preparedness within schools to identify and support candidates with special needs.
	+ Earlier identification of candidates, no later than the second year of secondary school, and provision of decisions on arrangements by the Department of Education and Science at an earlier date.
	+ Trial different options in schools to determine the most appropriate conditions for a candidate and incorporate special arrangements from the first year of secondary school, if possible.
	+ Offering additional 15 to 20 minutes in certain examinations as a pilot scheme to assess the impact on alleviating candidate difficulties.

**Review of Submissions and Recommendations**

* The document reviews submissions received in response to a discussion paper on special arrangements, highlighting issues with the current system and proposing principles for providing special arrangements.
* Recommendations include discontinuing the requirement that a candidate's general ability be not below ‘the average range’ for special arrangements and increasing school involvement in identifying and preparing candidates.

**Effective and Equitable Provision**

* Recommendations focus on reviewing examination instruments for accessibility, providing decisions on arrangements earlier, and ensuring schools are actively involved in preparing candidates for examinations.

**Treatment and Reporting of Candidate Performance**

* The work of candidates with special arrangements should be processed in the same way as other candidates, with an advisory to assistant examiners to refer material they have difficulty accessing to their Advising Examiner.
* Certificates of results should note if an examination element has been omitted or significantly altered due to special arrangements.

**Appendices**

* The document includes appendices providing guidance on calculating errors in spelling and grammar, setting up word-processed scripts for examinations, and ensuring candidates are fully credited for their work.

This summary captures the essence of the document, which is centred on ensuring fairness, accessibility, and integrity in the administration of certificate examinations for candidates with special needs.