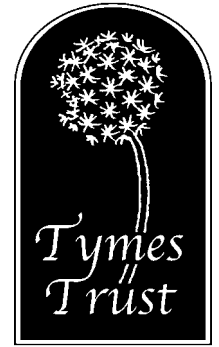


# *The Young ME Sufferers Trust*

## **School Examinations and ME**

### **Special Assessment Arrangements**



**Jane Colby**

Former Headteacher

Executive Director of The Young ME Sufferers Trust

Member: ASPECT (Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts); formerly the National Association of Educational Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants

## **Part 1 - General Principles**

*Special Arrangements* is the term used for making arrangements in advance of the exam.

*Special Considerations* is the term for what may be done afterwards at the marking stage.

The purpose of special examination arrangements is defined by a GCSE/A-level booklet as 'to enable candidates who might not otherwise be able to do so to demonstrate their attainment.'

We all know only too well that examinations and ME do not mix, because of 'mental fade'. However, they are a part of educational life and, like all education, they can be modified to suit the needs of children and young people with ME.

Special arrangements should be requested as matter of course, well in advance if possible. ME severely disadvantages pupils in exams due to the fatigability of the brain, and special provision helps to reduce that disadvantage, thus maximising the chances of a good mark.

It is not widely realised that exam boards genuinely wish to help. It is at the school level, or at the home tuition centre, that problems tend to be encountered. Teachers and administrators may not fully appreciate or have been trained in the needs of ME students. Many are sympathetic and constructive when explanations are given, but some, regretfully, still fall short of the ideal. Parents can access the booklets sent to schools about examination arrangements for children with

special requirements and check for themselves what amendments are possible.

For Key Stage National Curriculum tests, the relevant booklets are *Assessment Arrangements KS1, KS2 and KS3*. Most special arrangements can be granted by the school itself, but certain things require permission in advance from the Local Authority or from QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) depending on the status of the school.

Schools can get permission to grant extra time, vary the start time of the test, or even open the test early for the teacher to divide it into sections. The candidate then takes several 'mini-tests' with time for their brain to recover in between. Obviously, schools need warning for this.

At GCSE and A level, the Joint Council has rationalised special exam provision between the two exams. The relevant document is called *Candidates with Special Assessment Needs: Special Arrangements and Special Consideration*. It is not possible to list all conceivable arrangements here, but examples of concessions are:

- extra time
- supervised breaks or rest periods
- modifications of visual presentation such as enlarged print or if the candidate's eyes are light sensitive, use of a colour filter over the paper, or use of different coloured paper

The booklet advises schools that if candidates have multiple disabilities, they should make sure to consider **all** the possibilities for meeting their assessment needs.

The idea is that, whilst it would be unfair for a pupil to **gain advantage** over others, no pupil should be **disadvantaged** by exam arrangements. Similarly, arrangements **must not mislead** anyone about candidates' attainment, and **should not reduce the validity and reliability** of the assessment - in other words, the test must test what it is meant to test. So, in a history exam, it might be possible in exceptional circumstances to have the questions read out and for the candidate to dictate the answers, but this could not apply to an English exam meant to test reading and writing.

When one talks to the people in charge of these arrangements, whether at QCA or at the Joint Council, they come across as helpful and concerned to maximise all pupils' potential. If they can help, they will. And the final decision rests with them, not with the school or exam centre. Be creative. If it would help to use a computer's word processing program to avoid the physical exhaustion of writing, this can be allowed, as can other technological aids. The schedule can be modified to avoid exams occurring on the same day, although no exam can actually be taken earlier than scheduled. And a practical assistant could help in a practical exam, carrying out the candidate's instructions to save energy.

Pupils can even sit exams at home, maximising energy for thought, rather than dissipating it in travelling. Since, in ME, the use of physical energy noticeably depletes the energy available for thought and concentration, this is a vital consideration. It helps candidates to demonstrate their true ability, their knowledge and their understanding of the subject and can thereby maximise performance and grade.

This is in the interests of the school as well as the student, a fact that can be drawn to the attention of the school's Exams Officer if necessary.

Coursework can be another headache. But again, it can be modified. For candidates with physical disabilities, which is how ME should be considered, a later deadline can be allowed, or

fewer assignments undertaken, or even submission of shorter assignments in themselves.

The name Chronic Fatigue Syndrome has led to big misunderstandings about the nature of ME, which has led to all sorts of problems. Do explain that ME involves **neurological dysfunction** as well as **muscular exhaustion**. This qualifies most candidates for an additional exam time allowance of up to 25%, which can even be extended.

Pupils with Statements of Special Educational Need do not automatically qualify for special exam arrangements; their likely needs are supposed to be considered at the annual review of the Statement. However, if a Statement exists, or if the Statementing procedure has started, the school can often make decisions on its own which would normally need permission. Statement or no Statement, everyone should be prepared to furnish evidence to back up requests. This seems only reasonable.

Sometimes it is wiser to postpone an exam, however frustrating or upsetting that can be. For the sake of good grades, it is also wise to limit the subjects studied simultaneously and consider splitting exams between winter and summer where this option exists.

### **Some words of advice**

Experience shows it's best *not* to assume that by the time the exam comes along, the illness will have receded, and that no special exam provision will be required. There is, unfortunately, no really reliable prognosis in ME and revising is exhausting even for healthy pupils. Plan well ahead according to the student's *present* needs. Explain that not only is ME very long-lasting, it is variable, and extra effort tends to make symptoms worse, or can cause them to return just when everyone assumed they were over.

Remember that if the pupil is suddenly much worse on the day, **special consideration** can be given at the marking stage in exams leading to an external certificate (GCSE, A-level) but this does not apply to the National Curriculum tests.

Children and young people with ME may be well advised not to attempt National Curriculum tests, which are used to compile school league tables for the purposes of comparison between schools. They do not confer any qualification, and given

that the energy used in preparing for and taking tests may well affect health, and that the student needs to conserve energy for healing and other activities, it may be advisable to take only those exams that confer external qualifications.

Heads of exam centres (eg the school, the home tuition centre) have a duty to operate the whole

system of special provision and to see that the teachers of candidates with special assessment needs are shown the booklets. The principle behind it all is that the focus should be on the assessment needs of the individual child.

## Part 2 - Emergency Arrangements

Many young people do not ask for Special Arrangements in advance because they are not feeling too bad, and they do not realise how they may be affected by sitting a series of exams close together. As a result they become unwell before completing the exams, and there is a last-minute panic.

In some cases, just the revision itself is enough to cause relapse.

Any examination candidate (not just someone with ME) who becomes suddenly unwell can:

- Sit the examination at home at roughly the same time as the other candidates in school. An hour or two later may be possible if the candidate is supervised meanwhile (from the time of opening the paper at the school). Much later than that, and the school may need to telephone the Exam Board.
- Take rest breaks plus 15 minutes extra time per hour of the examination; the Examinations Officer at the school can arrange this.

- Have the use of a scribe (someone to do the actual writing) if the student is too weak to write. The school has to telephone the Exam Board for this to be arranged.

Any responsible adult (except a relative of the candidate) can invigilate the examination at the candidate's home. This adult collects the paper in a sealed envelope from the school 5 minutes before the examination is due to begin in school, takes it to the candidate's home, invigilates and returns it to the school after the examination is completed.

After the examination is over, the candidate can also apply for Special Consideration, for marking purposes.

There is an important medical concern in this kind of situation. The school has to be sure that the candidate is well enough to attempt the examination, and may want reassurance.

## Don't Panic!

If the exam has to be cancelled, it is not the end of the world. There is no specific timetable by which any particular qualifications have to be obtained, although many people assume that there is. The procedure is open-ended and there is no such thing as 'too late'.

It is also worth considering that the Open University can take students who have been unable to get qualifications such as GCSEs or A levels. The process of obtaining a degree may take more years than 'going to university' depending on how much study the student is able to do per year, but you can study at home, take

full account of your health, vary the amount you study in any one year, take a year out, and by the time you are around the same age as those leaving university you too could have a degree.

If you have health and memory difficulties taking exams, you may select courses that do not require a final examination, but instead ask you to do an extended assignment.

Grants are available for disabled students in many circumstances.

Good luck in your exams.