

Preferential Seating for Students With Low Vision

If you are helping a student with low vision get ready for the school year, “preferential seating” is probably already on the list of accommodations. It is one of the most common supports written into an IEP or 504 plan, and it sounds simple: move the student closer so they can see the board. Here is the part most people miss. The best seat for a student with low vision is not automatically the front row. The right seat depends on the student’s specific eye condition, the lighting in the room, and what is happening during the lesson. This guide walks you through how to find that seat, and how to write it into a plan so it actually helps. It is one of many classroom accommodations for students with low vision that work together.

Why the Front Row Is Not Always the Best Seat

Front-row seating became shorthand for “help this student see,” but sitting closer is only one piece of access. Moving a desk to the front can push a student directly under harsh overhead lights, or into window glare that washes out everything on the whiteboard they are trying to read.

Distance also matters less than people assume when a student uses magnification. A student reading through a handheld magnifier, a tablet, or a distance video magnifier can often see the board clearly from the middle of the room. Forcing them to the front adds glare without adding clarity.

The board is also not the only thing a student needs to see. Group work, projected screens, lab stations, and classmates’ faces all matter, and a single fixed front-row desk rarely serves all of them well.

How Seating Changes With Your Student’s Vision Condition

Low vision is a spectrum, not a single experience, and the right seat shifts with the condition. Two students in the same class can need seats on opposite sides of the room. Start from the student’s functional vision rather than the diagnosis label alone, but the patterns below are a useful starting point.

Vision condition	What the student experiences	Seating starting point
Central vision loss (macular degeneration, Stargardt disease)	Blurred or missing detail in the center of view	Best viewing angle and an outlet for a magnifier; raw distance matters less
Peripheral vision loss (retinitis pigmentosa, glaucoma)	Narrowed, tunnel-like field of view	Central seat with a direct line to the board; keep a clear path to the door
Light sensitivity (albinism, aniridia, cortical visual impairment)	Discomfort and glare in bright light	Away from windows and bright fixtures; control or dim the lighting
General or fluctuating low vision	Uses remaining vision for most tasks	Close to the board, near an outlet and the teacher; adjust as needed

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Central Vision Loss (Macular Degeneration, Stargardt Disease)

Central vision loss blurs or blanks out the middle of what a student sees, which makes fine detail on the board hard to read even from up close. For these students, viewing angle and lighting usually matter more than raw distance, because they rely on magnification or a device no matter where they sit. Position the desk so the student can angle toward the board and reach a power outlet for a video magnifier or tablet.

Peripheral Vision Loss (Retinitis Pigmentosa, Glaucoma)

Peripheral vision loss narrows the field of view, a little like looking through a tube, so a student can miss information off to the sides. A central seat with a direct line to the teacher and the board usually works best, so the student does not have to scan across a wide angle. Keep a clear, predictable path to the door, since a narrowed field also affects safe movement around the room.

Light Sensitivity (Albinism, Aniridia, Cortical Visual Impairment)

Students who are sensitive to light often do worse near windows and bright fixtures, even when that spot is close to the board. For them, a seat away from direct light, sometimes toward the back where lighting can be dimmed or controlled, is more comfortable and more usable. A hat, visor, or tinted lenses may help wherever they sit, so lighting control usually matters more than desk location.

General or Fluctuating Low Vision

When a student uses their remaining vision for most tasks, a seat close to the board plus easy access to a power outlet for assistive technology is a solid default. Keep them near the teacher for quick verbal check-ins, and be ready to adjust as their vision or the lesson changes through the year.

Match the Seat to the Activity, Not Just the Board

A seat that is perfect for a lecture can be the wrong seat for a science lab. The most useful plans treat seating as flexible and tie it to what the student is actually doing that hour.

For board instruction, prioritize a clear, glare-free line to where the teacher writes or projects. For small-group work, choose a well-lit table where the student faces away from window glare. For computer work, angle the screen so overhead lights do not reflect off it, and for hands-on or lab work, add task lighting at a well-lit station. In PE or specials, keep the student in a consistent position relative to the instructor so they always know where to look.

One quick test many teachers of the visually impaired recommend: sit in the student's seat at different times of day. Glare that is invisible in the morning can wash out the board when the afternoon sun hits the window, and you will only catch it by looking from their chair.

When Preferential Seating Is Not Enough

Here is the honest part a seating chart cannot fix: moving a student closer does not make every detail readable. A student with significant central vision loss can sit in the front row and still not read standard-size text on the board.

Preferential seating works best as a companion to accessible materials and assistive technology, not a replacement for them. If your student needs large print, digital files they can enlarge, copies of the notes, or one of the low vision magnification products that enlarge the

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board from a distance, the seat helps them use those tools, but the tools do the real work. If seating is the only accommodation on the plan, the plan is probably incomplete.

How to Write Seating Into an IEP That Actually Works

“Preferential seating” on its own means different things to different teachers, and a vague line often gets read as “front row” by default. Specific language protects the student when the classroom, teacher, or seating chart changes.

Spell out what the seat needs to do: proximity to the board, distance from windows and glare, access to a power outlet, and a clear line to the teacher. Add flexibility language so the seat can change by activity, and name who decides, usually the team with input from the teacher of the visually impaired. Build in a review at least once a semester, and put the student’s own feedback at the center, because they usually know what they can and cannot see better than anyone.

Take the Next Step

Finding the right seat is easier when it starts with real information about how a student uses their vision. At [New England Low Vision and Blindness](#), our specialists help teachers, parents, and IEP teams turn a functional vision assessment into specific, workable seating recommendations, along with the assistive technology that makes that seat effective. If you want individualized guidance for a student, [Schedule No-Obligation Consultation](#) and we will help you build a seating plan that fits the student, the condition, and the classroom. You can also reach our team at (888) 211-6933.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should a student with low vision always sit in the front row?

No. The front row helps some students but creates glare or harsh overhead light for others, and students who use magnification can often see the board from farther back. The best seat depends on the student’s eye condition, the room’s lighting, and the activity.

What does “preferential seating” mean on an IEP?

It means the student is placed where they get the best access to instruction, not one specific chair. Because it is often read as “front row” by default, the plan should spell out details like glare avoidance, outlet access, and a clear line to the board.

Who decides where a student with low vision sits?

The IEP or 504 team decides, usually with input from the classroom teacher and the teacher of the visually impaired. The student’s own feedback should guide the final choice, and the team should review the seat at least once a semester.

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About This Document

This white paper was created by New England Low Vision and Blindness. Portions of the content were generated using AI technology and reviewed for accuracy. However, the information is provided “as is” and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or a comprehensive assessment.

About New England Low Vision and Blindness

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