



How are students evaluated for special education services?

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The topic of special education is often a complicated one, full of popular misunderstandings and more than a few acronyms. This article seeks to clarify some of those misunderstandings and provide general information related to making a referral to special education should you have a concern. However, this article is not meant to address all potential scenarios. If, following reading this article, you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Boyle at kboyle@seymourschools.org and/or (203) 888-7232 for additional information and/or clarification.

Special education is available to students who are identified as having a disability as defined under federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education ACT, or IDEA. Special education disabilities are often different from a disability that a medical provider would diagnose. Instead, IDEA lists 13 different disabilities:

- Autism,
- Deafness,
- Deaf-blindness,
- Emotional Disturbance,
- Hearing Impairment,
- Intellectual Disabilities,
- Multiple Disabilities,
- Orthopedic Impairment,
- Other Health Impairment (which includes Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder),
- Specific Learning Disability,
- Speech or Language Impairment,
- Traumatic Brain Injury, and
- Visual Impairment,

All of which affect a student's abilities to learn. Each school district has what is referred to as a Child Find obligation, which is a legal requirement that schools find all students who have a disability and may require special education services. Even for students in a parochial school or are being homeschooled, a parent or a staff member from the school may make a referral to a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting with the local school district or the school district in which the family resides.

To identify an educational disability, school staff and the parents or guardians meet in a Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting. A referral can be made prior to a child's third birthday, and can be made throughout the student's school career until they graduate from high school. At that first meeting, parents and staff discuss their concerns for the student. The PPT also discusses, based on these concerns, if there is a potential that the student has one of these educational disabilities. If there is sufficient concern that the student may have one of these disabilities, the team will plan an evaluation to help determine whether or not the student does have a disability and requires special education services. At this point in the process, an evaluation can only occur with the parent's consent. The parent has the right to choose whether or not to move forward with this evaluation and can ask questions to the school staff to help make an informed decision. If consent is provided by the parent, the school has 45 school days, from the date of the referral, to complete the evaluation.

After the team considers the referral, if it does not have concerns that the student has an educational disability, there may not be an evaluation recommended. That does not mean there are not concerns for the student amongst the team or that the team disagrees with the parent. The school may even plan additional educational and/or behavioral supports through the school's Progress Monitoring Team (PMT) to take place after this meeting to remediate the area(s) of concern and to collect more information. If concerns continue or worsen after the first meeting, another referral to a PPT meeting can be made by parents or school staff.

In those instances when an evaluation is warranted, the comprehensive evaluation will be planned specifically to the areas of concern discussed in the PPT meeting. Oftentimes, this evaluation would include assessments from the School Psychologist and a Special Education Teacher, and could include other professionals such as a Speech-Language Pathologist. These evaluations are at no cost to the family and are typically completed by members of the school district's staff.

Upon completion of the evaluation, another Planning and Placement Team meeting will be convened to (1) discuss the evaluation results and (2) determine eligibility for special education services under one of the special education disabilities. For students who are found eligible for special education services, a document called an Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be developed. This document will discuss any specialized instruction and accommodations/modifications that will be provided. The IEP also documents the student's present levels of academic and functional performance at the time of the meeting. The school district cannot provide these special education supports without the consent of a parent.

For students with an identified special education disability, the IEP is a document that will be reviewed at least one time annually. However, a Planning and Placement Team meeting can be requested at any time by a parent or a staff member. In addition, at a minimum of every three years, the Planning and Placement Team will conduct a reevaluation, which will collect additional information to determine if special education services continue to be warranted, as well as to help the team determine what services would be most appropriate. Similar to the initial evaluation, the triennial reevaluation will require parental consent.

Throughout this process, parental feedback is valuable. At a Planning and Placement Team meeting, there will be multiple staff members from different disciplines gathered to discuss concerns about the child. For some, that can create a level of anxiety. That is not the purpose of convening a meeting with these professionals. Each member of the team will bring a unique perspective to the discussion based on their education and experiences. As a parent, your experiences with your child also makes you an expert. The team will welcome discussion related to your observations and concerns.

If you believe a PPT meeting is warranted to discuss your concerns, please make your request to any professional within your child's school. They will make sure that a meeting is scheduled for you to share your concerns. For questions about this process, please do not hesitate to reach out to Dr. Boyle at KBoyle@seymourschools.org or (203) 888-7232.