



Special Education

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Specially Designed Instruction

Did you know that students can have a disability and not qualify for special education? There are many processes that are embedded in our special education procedures that are less known than others. Often what is heard in the preliminary stages of child find is, “We think this student qualifies for special education.” But is it really understood what it takes to qualify as having a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)? The determination for qualifying a student for special education is three-pronged.

Prong One

Any time a person suspects that a student has a disability, members of the student’s educational team need to meet to determine if the student should be considered for assessment for special education services. If the educational team determines that a student should move forward, the first step is to create a profile. A profile is a process for the team to discuss several areas of education to determine if the student is successfully accessing education and what concerns there are surrounding this access. The profile leads the team to determine what areas of concern require assessment and those assessments provide parameters for which the team can determine if a disability exists. If the team determines “no,” the student does not have a disability according to assessments, the process for determining whether the student qualifies for special education would stop at that point because prong one was not met. If assessments show the student does have a disability, the team moves to the next prong in determining the need for special education.

Prong Two

In this step of the process, the team must determine if the disability impacts the student’s access to education. It is possible for a student to have a disability and for there not be an educational need. Much of the data that needs to be reviewed will be from state and district assessments, but there should also be a significant contribution by the classroom teacher as to how the student is progressing in skills day to day within the classroom. If the student is struggling with math or reading, the information that the classroom teacher should speak to is the student’s skills and how those skills either support or impede the student’s ability to make expected gains in the classroom. If the student is exhibiting behaviors that impede their own learning, it is important for the classroom teacher to be able to speak to what skills the student is lagging in that create



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the situation where behaviors are manifested and the impact of that on expected gains in the classroom. If the team determines there is no educational impact due to a disability, the process of qualifying for special education would stop because prong two would not have been met. If there is a disability and there is an educational impact, then the team would move on to the final prong.

Prong Three

The third and final prong for the team to look at when determining if a student qualifies for special education is: Does the student require specially designed instruction? It is important to note that accommodations are not specially designed instruction. If a child who has a disability does not require specially designed instruction, but does require accommodations, then the team may want to look at whether a 504 is required. Specially designed instruction means to adapt content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to address the unique needs of students. Sometimes there is a different intervention tool or curriculum than is used in the general education classroom, but the intervention tool is not in and of itself specially designed instruction. In an article written by Nicole Barrion, a special education instructional specialist in Washington, D.C., she explains she has delivered a lot of training on specially designed instruction and that many teachers have an “aha moment” when they realize they are primarily providing accommodations rather than specially designed instruction.

What is a good way to know that a child requires special education and that specially designed instruction is being utilized? This leads into the goal area of the IEP. The team needs to ask themselves, “what skill(s) does the student need to build?” If there are no skills to build, then it is questionable as to whether the student requires special education. In other words, students who require a “cool down place” or “additional time to complete work” and nothing more, would not qualify for special education. They should be provided ways to fill those needs, but since it is not specially designed instruction, the team would not move into qualifying the student for special education. If the student does have missing or significantly lagging skills, then there is an indication that they require specially designed instruction and would qualify for special education. The plan to determine what that specially designed instruction is for and how it looks would be determined in the IEP meeting.

