

Perhaps one of the questions most often asked by parents is how they get their children tested for special education services. It seems there are multiple tasks required, and the process can be challenging. The process should not be, this narrative is intended to provide a map to help parents navigate education, including requests for special education services.

First, and foremost, there is not a great gap in services between special education and general education. Both are provided by the school, by law, and both services are intended to make sure your child receives the education they need to be successful. There are also a lot of processes occurring that you may not be aware of. We will try to cover the spectrum of services, what they mean and what you need to know.

In an ideal world every child is loved, cared for, and receives the education they need to progress through school. Everyone feels good and graduation is the culmination of the public school experience. Then again, we all know one size does not fit all, so there will be struggles.

To understand this it is a good idea to look in the mirror. Some of us learn by hearing, others by seeing or doing. We all learn differently, and for some of us school is a challenging task. That does not mean people cannot learn, but people do learn differently and have much different skill sets and interests. It would be a boring world if we all wanted to be teachers, or doctors, or truck drivers. But, we have to acknowledge that people usually choose jobs that fit their skill set, it makes life much more enjoyable!

The process of identifying children for special education is called child find. Child find applies to children from birth to age 21, with a few extra rules. First, in many cases the services for birth to 3 are provided under a special education law known as Part C. Part C services are usually not provided by schools, meaning you have to work with another agency you may not have met yet.

At age three the school takes over and is responsible for child find until age 21 unless the youth has graduated from high school at which time special education services end under the assumption the youth has received the education necessary to move to adult services. Yes, this means a new group of agencies to work with, but our job here is not to talk about that need so we will stay on topic.

Child find is part of a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As noted before this applies to children from birth to age 21. It is also important to note this applies to children who are homeschooled or are in a private school, although the paperwork looks different and there are some additional rules. Again, we will not go there.

Child find requires school to have a process for identifying and evaluating children who may need special education and related services such as speech therapy or counseling. These programs help parents find out if their children are on track, meeting educational and developmental milestones. If the school knows, or has reason to suspect your child has a disability, then by law (IDEA) it must agree to do an evaluation. For example, a child's teacher, or you may be concerned about a child's academic work and request an evaluation. By law, the school must seriously consider your request.

However, the school does not have to agree to every request for evaluation. If there is no reason to think your child has a disability that requires services, the school does not have to evaluate. The school may also talk to you about interventions, Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). While these are often seen as delaying tactics this is really your chance to get involved in the process! If your child is struggling to read the school might propose a reading intervention,

instruction designed to address the reading concerns. This is not intended to be more of the same, but an intervention more focused on exactly what your child needs. It could occur during the regular reading time, or at another time during the day. Ideally this is a conversation between the parent and the school, partners trying to support good instruction. The instruction should generate data. An example might be a child who only recognizes 15 of the 26 letters and letter sounds, a key pre-reading skill. The instruction might be letter sound recognition instruction. After a few weeks of instruction the teacher, principal and the parents look at the intervention. Did it work? Has your child made gains, are they closing the gap and catching up with the class on the expected skills. If this is happening, great work! You have created a partnership with the school and your child is making the gains to be successful.

If this intervention is not making a difference then it is time to talk once again. What other intervention should we try? Was the last intervention targeted at your child's specific needs? Did we deliver this instruction with fidelity (regularly) and with clear intent to increase your child's skills?

It is also important to note that these interventions, frequently called Response to Intervention (RTI) are another path to an IEP. Sometimes a child works very hard and cannot catch up, but when tested is considered to be achieving close to their ability. Even though everyone knows the child is struggling special education does not seem to be an option. Many of our elementary schools can identify children for special education using the RTI process. Simply said, we have tried everything else and, while testing does not show the child needs special education, our day to day experience says otherwise. Based on these interventions it is possible to identify a child for special education services because we know that is what works. More importantly, Identification through the RTI process requires parent be informed and are a part of the process. Again working with and being a part of the decision making process.

The RTI process can go on for several weeks. If it works, and does make a difference, then special educator may not be necessary, your child can succeed with this little, extra boost! If this does not work then Child Find applies.

At this point either the school or the parent can talk about a referral and evaluation plan. The referral is very simple, it includes demographic information about you and our child as well as your concerns, and if possible what has been tried to help your child. This is really the first step in a special education evaluation to determine if your child need special education services. Once you and the school agree on exactly what your concerns are, that could be reading, math, writing, behavior, etc. this guides the next form, an evaluation plan. The evaluation plan is a list of assessment the school will conduct to address the concerns you have agreed upon. This is acritical piece of the process. If the concern is reading the tests focus on reading. If the concern is behavior, the tests would include surveys and observations to collect behavior data so we can address the need, determine if this is a barrier to school success and work with you to develop a plan.

It is also important to know that parents might sign the evaluation plan, the school cannot conduct a special education evaluation without permission.

In summary, I would encourage you to talk to the school about your concerns and work to generate solutions together. If you feel that you have not been heard, I would encourage you to contact the Assistant Superintendent for Grades K-6 at 268-6006 or the Superintendent for Grades 7-12 at 268-6008.

You are also welcome to call the Student Services offices at 268-6775. We do want to work with you. We may propose something other than starting with an evaluation, but we always want to make sure you child is successful. If you feel we have not lived up to this standard, then call the number above, we will gladly work with you to address your child's needs.