



NASET Q & A Corner

Issue #11

Questions and Answers About The Individual Evaluation Process for Special Education

What is an Evaluation for Special Education?

At the conclusion of the referral process to the IEP Committee, an individual evaluation on the student will take place. This can only occur if the parent/guardian has given written permission. This evaluation will involve formal tests, informal assessment measures, observations, interviews as well as other assessment measures deemed necessary by the assessment team. This will help the school determine whether the student has a possible disability and whether special services are required. The evaluation will also attempt to determine unrelated factors to the disability are affecting the student in school. The results of the evaluation will be used as a guide to develop the student's educational program. It will determine whether adjustments will have to be made to the student's educational program.

What are the Components of a Comprehensive Evaluation?

Before an evaluation is completed, speak to the staff regarding the dates and procedures for the evaluation. It should be a comprehensive assessment of the student's abilities.

There are numerous tests that can be used by professionals in the evaluation process. All the tests used to evaluate the student's suspected disability should be administered on an individual basis.

Most tests are either norm-referenced or criterion-referenced. Norm-referenced tests are tests which are standardized on groups of individuals. Such tests measure a student's performance relative to the performance of a group of individuals with similar characteristics. Tests which are administered at the district, state or national level are usually norm-referenced.

Criterion-referenced tests measure a student's achievement or development relative to a specific standard. Such tests are especially useful for planning instruction or measuring curriculum content mastery because they can correspond closely to curriculum content and classroom instruction. Test which are selected or developed and administered by the classroom teacher are generally criterion-referenced.

Specifically these assessment measures may include but are not limited to:

- Individual psychological evaluation (when determined necessary by the multi-disciplinary team) including general intelligence, instructional needs, learning strengths and weaknesses, social emotional dynamics. This will be completed by a licensed school psychologist.
- Social history either taken by a social worker or a school psychologist.
- Physical examination including specific assessments that relate to vision, hearing, health, done either by the school physician or the own doctor.
- Observation of the student in his/her current educational setting. This is an observation done in the classroom usually by another teacher, most likely a resource room or special education teacher.
- Appropriate educational evaluation specifically pinpointing the areas of deficit or suspected disability including but not limited to educational achievement, academic needs, learning strengths and weaknesses, vocational assessments.
- Vocational assessments if the student is of age to be included in Transition Services to assess work related skills and interests to be completed by any of the following professional vocational or rehabilitation counselors, work study evaluators or the guidance counselors.
- Bilingual assessment should be included for students with limited English proficiency. The evaluation should be in the student's native language.

Inform the parent/guardian that these evaluations may lead to the development of an individual educational plan and that the parent/guardian should work closely with the school to ensure that the evaluation is comprehensive and beneficial in determining his or her student's future educational needs. However, if the parent/guardian decides that evaluations recommended and/or completed by the school are not appropriate or sufficient he or she may have the right to obtain an independent evaluation at the expense of the district unless the district initiates an impartial hearing showing that the district's evaluation was sufficient. If the impartial hearing officer determines that the district's evaluation was appropriate, the parent/guardian may still wish to obtain an independent evaluation, understanding that the district will not be responsible for the expense.

Evaluation procedures Under IDEA

- (a) Notice. The public agency must provide notice to the parent/guardians of a student with a disability, in accordance with Sec. 300.503, that describes any evaluation procedures the agency proposes to conduct.
- (b) Conduct of evaluation. In conducting the evaluation, the public agency must—
 - (1) Use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the student, including information provided by the parent/guardian, that may assist in determining—
 - (i) Whether the student is a student with a disability under Sec. 300.8; and
 - (ii) The content of the student's IEP, including information related to enabling the student to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum (or for a preschool student, to participate in appropriate activities);
 - (2) Not use any single procedure as the sole criterion for determining whether a student is a student with a disability and for determining an appropriate educational program for the student; and
 - (3) Use technically sound instruments that may assess the relative contribution of

cognitive and behavioral factors, in addition to physical or developmental factors.

(c) Other evaluation procedures. Each public agency must ensure that—

(1) Assessments and other evaluation materials used to assess a student under this part—

(i) Are selected and administered so as not to be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis;

(ii) Are provided and administered in the student's native language or other mode of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information on what the student knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is clearly not feasible to so provide or administer;

(iii) Are used for the purposes for which the assessments or measures are valid and reliable;

(iv) Are administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel; and

(v) Are administered in accordance with any instructions provided by the producer of the assessments.

(2) Assessments and other evaluation materials include those tailored to assess specific areas of educational need and not merely those that are designed to provide a single general intelligence quotient.

(3) Assessments are selected and administered so as best to ensure that if an assessment is administered to a student with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, the assessment results accurately reflect the student's aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factors the test purports to measure, rather than reflecting the student's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills (unless those skills are the factors that the test purports to measure).

(4) The student is assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities;

(5) Assessments of students with disabilities who transfer from one public agency to another public agency in the same academic year are coordinated with those students' prior and subsequent schools, as necessary and as expeditiously as possible, to ensure prompt completion of full evaluations.

(6) In evaluating each student with a disability under Sec. Sec. 300.304 through 300.306, the evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the student's special education and related services needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the student has been classified.

(7) Assessment tools and strategies that provide relevant information that directly assists persons in determining the educational needs of the student are provided.

How Should Parent/guardians go about Obtaining School Records on his or her Student?

Before a parent/guardian is brought in for an interview as part of this evaluation procedure, you may suggest that they obtain any school records on his or her student in order to be prepared. These records are the rights of the parent/guardian. However, there may be a minimal cost involved for reproduction or a district requirement through the mail for the procurement of such records.

The school usually has a wealth of information about each student distributed among a number of people and a number of records. The Freedom of Information Law guarantees a parent/guardian's rights to look at, and make copies of any or all information on his or her student that is available within the school. In order to accomplish this, the parent/guardian may need to inform the principal verbally and sometimes in writing that he or she wishes to look at all the records available on his or her student. Tell the parent/guardian to be specific and tell the school which records and materials he or she would like to see when he or she comes to the meeting. Gathering this information may increase the parent/guardian(s)'s own awareness of the student's needs, reduce the need for testing and provide a very thorough picture of the student and his/her abilities and patterns. School records usually exist in several files within a school. These may include:

- Permanent record folder usually filed in the main office
- Guidance counselors file on a secondary level usually filed in the guidance office
- Psychological records including results of evaluations usually filed in a locked cabinet in the psychologist's office
- Health records usually filed in the nurses office
- Disciplinary records usually filed in the principal's office
- Special education records including copies of IEP's, evaluation results and so on usually filed either in the special education teacher's files or at central administration at the Director of Pupil Personnel Services.
- Attendance records usually found in the main office or attendance office at the secondary level.

All of these files will include a variety of information. Investigating the following areas will contribute to the overall "picture" of the student:

Prior Teacher reports: Comments written on report cards or in may provide a different view of the student under a different style of teaching. Successful years with positive comments may be a clue for the parent/guardian to the student's learning style and may provide him or her with information about the conditions under which the student responds best. This is usually found in the permanent record folder.

Reports of prior parent/guardian-teacher interviews: Notes may exist in the permanent record folder or psychologist's folder on prior conferences between the parent/guardian and previous teachers. This may provide the parent/guardian(s) with information that may be important in understanding the student's patterns and history.

Cumulative school record: This particular file may contain information from standardized achievement test results, group IQ results, teacher comments dating back to kindergarten, records from previous schools, and individual reading test results. There is usually no set rule on what must be kept in this folder.

Group IQ test information: If a district administers such tests, this information is usually found in the permanent record folder. Many schools administer this type of test i.e. Otis Lennon, Henmon Nelson in grades 3, 6 and 9 so look carefully. Within the past year or so the term School Abilities Index has replaced the term "IQ" or Intelligence Quotient.

Report card grades: These materials can be reviewed for comments, patterns of productive and difficult years. Copies of these reports are usually always placed in the permanent record folder.

Attendance records: These records should be reviewed to determine the accuracy of patterns of lateness or absence. If such patterns exist then the reasons should be reviewed by the parent/guardian to rule out medical causes (hospital stays, illness), psychological causes (dysfunctional family patterns, school phobia etc) or social causes (peer rejection or isolation).

Prior teacher referrals: Investigate school records for prior referrals from teachers. There are times when a teacher will refer but no action may have been taken due to time of year, delay in evaluation procedures, etc. These referrals may still be on file and may reveal information that can be useful.

Medical history in the school nurses office: Investigate these records for indications of visual or hearing difficulties, and what the school may or may not have on file. They may not have important information on illness, medication, allergies, and medical emergencies and so on.

What Should a Parent/guardian Expect and Provide for the Parent/guardian Intake or Interview?

The next step in the process used by the school may involve asking a parent/guardian(s) to come in for a meeting to provide a complete social history which can be regarded as a description of the family life situation. In some cases this part of the process may not be possible to obtain because of a number of variables such as parent/guardian's work restrictions, inability to obtain coverage for younger siblings and so on.

While the intake in many schools is done by the social worker, special education teacher or psychologist, it is important that the parent/guardian(s) understand the process in case he or she is called upon to provide this information. There are several things you will need to suggest to the parent/guardian(s) before the meeting.

- 1) Try not to view the school as an adversary even if the parent/guardians have experienced a series of negative school meetings over the years. Keep in mind that the parent/guardians have due process rights and no major decisions can be made without their input or permission.
- 2) Have the parent/guardian ask for a pad or paper and a pen so that the parent/guardian can write down information, terms or notes on the meeting.
- 3) If the parent/guardian is asked at this meeting to sign an assessment plan and release for testing suggest that he or she requests to know the types of assessments used, purpose of testing and what the parent/guardian hopes to gain from the process. Normally this information is provided in the assessment plan.
- 4) Be sure to ask the intake professional the purpose of the meeting and the steps involved in the referral process if the parent/guardian gives permission to evaluate. Keep in mind that no recommendation can or should be made without the parent/guardians input and permission.
- 5) Make sure the staff member discusses and explains the procedures involved if the testing reveals the presence of an educational disability and the case needs to be reviewed by the IEP Committee. This is an important piece of information since it involves the parent/guardian's right to due process.
- 6) Ask about the confidentiality of the information gathered. Inquire which individuals on the team will be seeing the information and the purpose for their review of the facts.

A necessary part of the evaluation process involves a parent/guardian intake to gather relevant information, past and present that might have an impact on the student's present situation. At the time of the intake many questions may be asked about family history, developmental history, academic history, social history and so on. If at any time the parent/guardian(s) feel uncomfortable with the question just tell them to indicate that he or she would rather not discuss the issue. A parent/guardian intake form should contain necessary but not intrusive questions. The questions should be specific enough to help in the diagnosis of the problem, but not so specific as to place the parent/guardians in a vulnerable and defensive position.