

Inclusion--Parent Tips

List of Articles

A Parent's Guide to Special Education

A Joint Publication of The Federation for Children with Special Needs and
The MA Department of Education

IDEA and Your Child's Rights

Published by the Autism Society of America

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Published by the Autism Society of America

Family and Community Integration

By Nicki Shusterman

Federation for Children with Special Needs pamphlet

A Checklist To Assess Service Appropriateness

Developed by the NJ Task Force on Autism

The OASIS Asperger Syndrome Guide for Teachers Letter of Introduction

Preparing the Way

By Abby Messner

Some of the Benefits of Inclusive Education

Updated: 7/1/2009

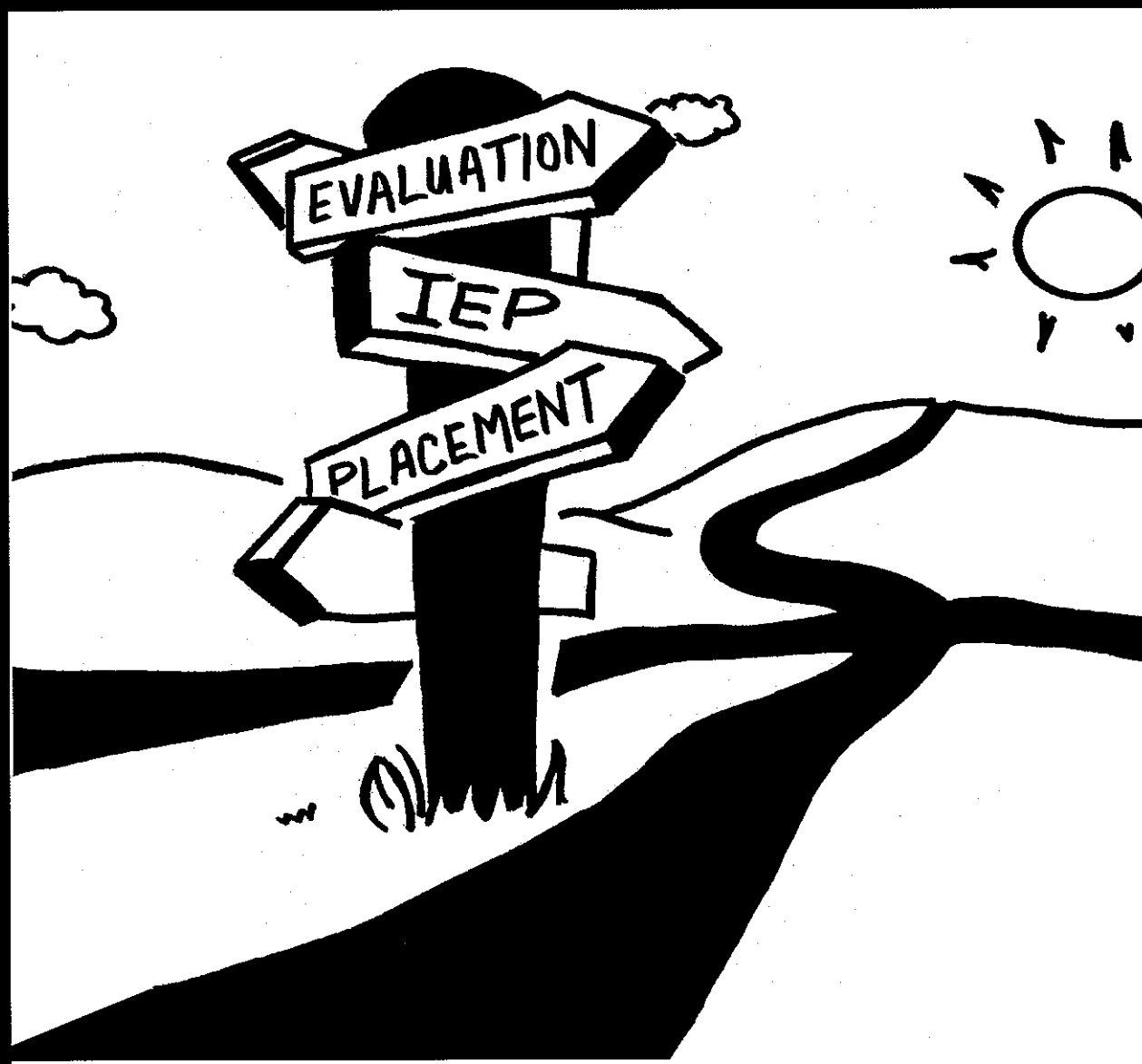


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A Parent's Guide to Special Education

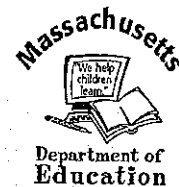


A JOINT PUBLICATION OF
The Federation for Children with Special Needs and
The Massachusetts Department of Education



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Acknowledgments

The Parent Information Project is a statewide training and information dissemination project located at the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) and funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of Special Services. The intent of the project is to enhance the involvement of parents of children with special needs in their children's education, development, and transition to adult life.

The Federation for Children with Special Needs is a nonprofit organization based on the philosophy of parents helping parents. Founded in 1974 as a coalition of twelve disability and parent organizations, today the Federation is an independent advocacy organization committed to quality education and health care for all, and to protecting the rights of children. To this end, the Federation provides information, support and assistance to the parents of children with disabilities, their organizations, their professional partners, and their communities.

The Massachusetts Department of Education and the Federation for Children with Special Needs have worked collaboratively to create a product that will serve parents well in their need to gather information regarding special education services. The two agencies do not necessarily agree on all policy interpretations; however, we do agree that it is important for parents to have the most accurate and up-to-date information available, in order that they may work as equal partners with their school system in special education decision-making.

The Parent Information Project would like to acknowledge K. Nummi Nummerdor, Margaret Marotta Smith, Richard Robison, Marty Mittnacht, Katherine Honey, and Kristen McIntosh for their ongoing support and assistance in the publication of this manual.

Dear Parent:

If you are reading "A Parent's Guide to Special Education," you probably have some concerns about how your child is doing in school. You may be wondering if your child has a disability and needs special education, or, you already know that he or she needs special education and you want to know more about the special education process. The purpose of this Guide is to explain the special education process so that, if your son or daughter does receive special education services, you can work effectively with the school as a member of your child's special education team.

Special education is meant to meet the unique needs of a child that result from a disability, and to assure that students with disabilities receive all needed aids and services. Special education laws and regulations are meant to protect a student with disabilities and ensure that he or she gets the services and assistance that may be necessary to make effective progress. The laws and regulations are also very complex. We hope this Guide will be helpful to you in understanding the key concepts of the law and how to be an effective participant in the special education process.

For over twenty-five years, the Federation for Children with Special Needs (Federation) has been a parent-run organization providing training and technical assistance to families of children with special needs. The Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) has oversight responsibility for public schools and seeks to ensure effective and sound educational practices for students across the Commonwealth. In a collaborative effort, the DOE and the Federation have developed "A Parent's Guide to Special Education" to provide information about the special education process. Research, history, and experience tell us that when parents are actively involved in their child's education, the child does better in school. We hope this Guide will help you become an informed member of your child's special education team so that your child has the best possible opportunity to learn and enjoy school.

Sincerely,

Marcia Mittnacht
State Director of Special Education
Massachusetts Department of Education

Richard J. Robison
Executive Director
Federation for Children with Special Needs

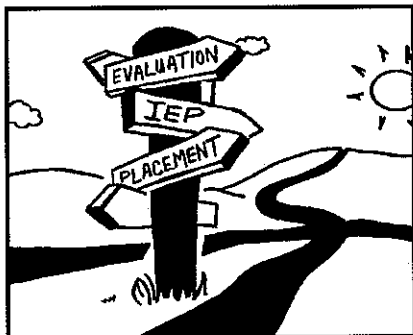





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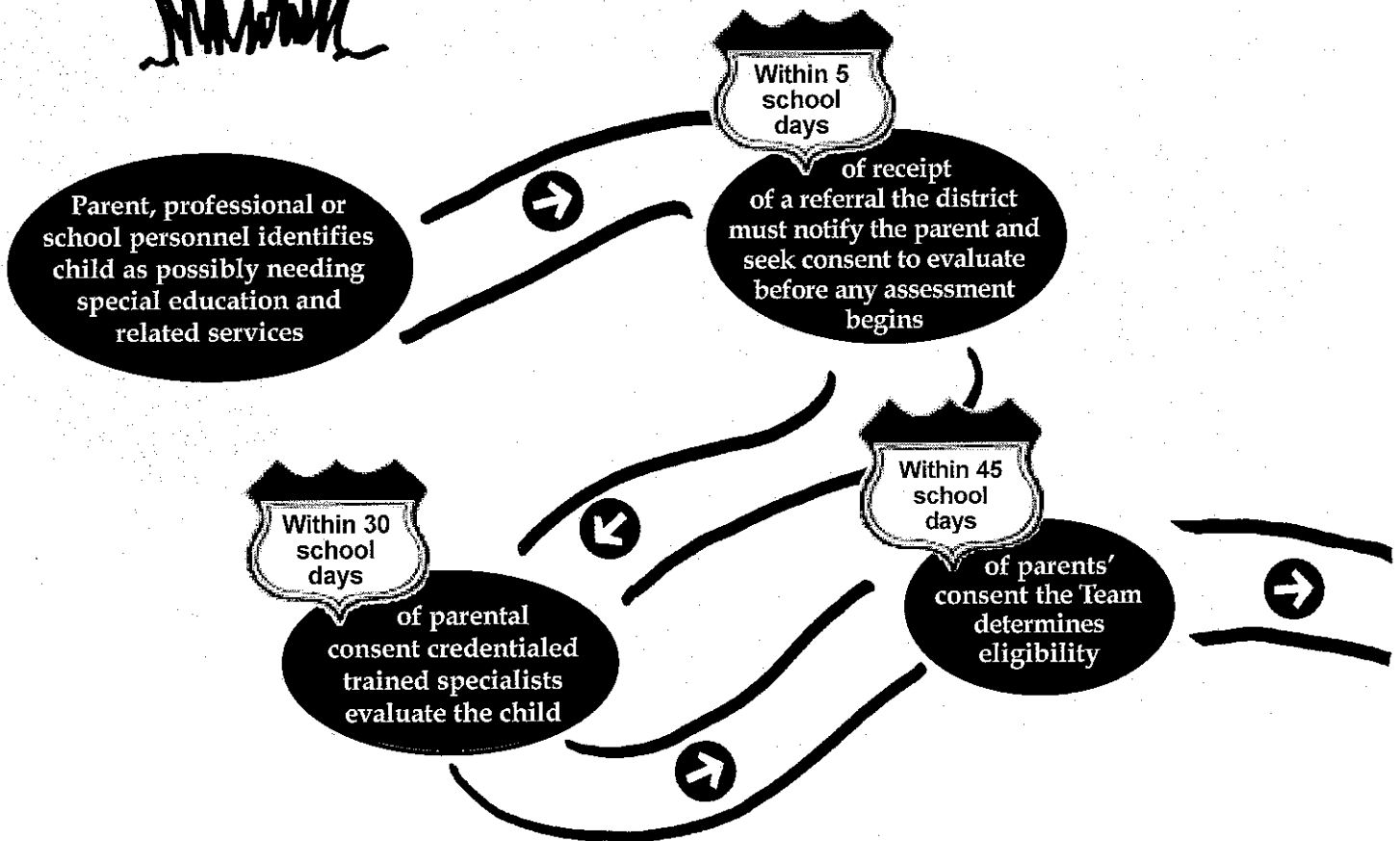
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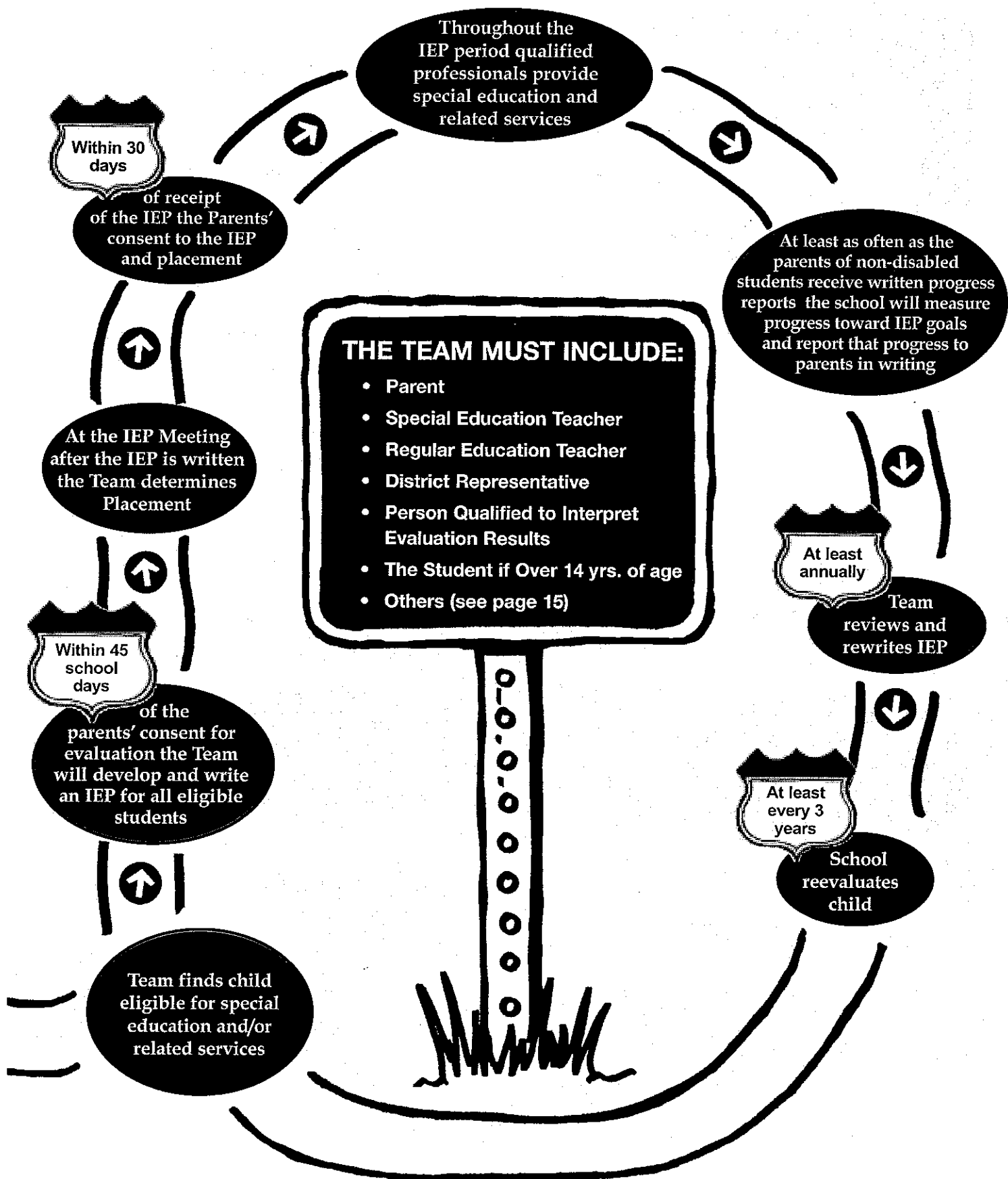
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Understanding the Special Education Process

A Brief Overview for Students Eligible for Special Education

Below is a brief overview of how a student is found eligible for special education, how the IEP is developed and implemented, and how progress is measured.







Introduction

Students with disabilities can achieve great things in school when they receive the supports and services they require. While not every child with a disability will require special education services, every child whose disability affects their school progress is entitled to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) which meets their unique needs. In this era of school reform, it is expected that high standards will guide the teaching of all students.

A parent, teacher or other professional may refer a student for special education evaluation at any time by contacting the school's principal or administrator of special education.

If you are concerned that your child may have a disability that is affecting his or her ability to make progress in school, you can first speak with the classroom teacher. As you speak with the teacher, explain your concerns and ask the teacher to share his or her concerns. As part of your discussion, it may be decided that classroom accommodations will be used to address concerns for a short period of time. If your child continues to have difficulty with schoolwork, you may make a referral for a special education evaluation at any time.

Special Education Laws and Principles

Special education is specially designed instruction and related services that meet the unique needs of an eligible student with a disability or a specific service need that is necessary to allow the student with a disability to access the general curriculum. The purpose of special education is to allow the student to successfully develop his or her individual educational potential. Along with providing services to the child, if necessary, services are provided to parents and to teachers for the student to benefit from special education. Special education is provided by the school district at no cost to parents.

In Massachusetts, the special education system is based on the federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in combination with the state's special education law (MGL c. 71B). These laws protect students with disabilities who are eligible for special education and guarantee them an Individualized Education Program (IEP) designed to meet their unique needs.

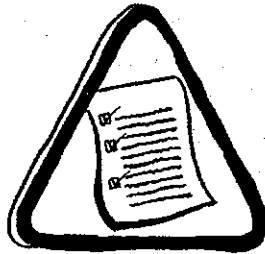
**What are the key
special education laws?**

Special Education Law is organized around the following six principles:

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What are the major principles of special education laws?
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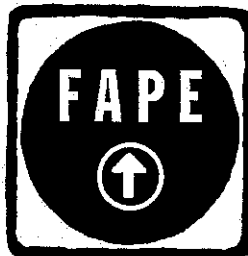
1. Parent and Student Participation



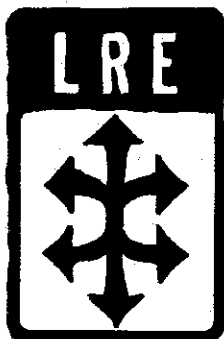
2. Appropriate Evaluation



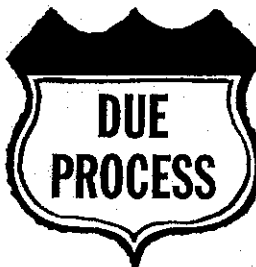
3. Individualized Education Program (IEP)



4. Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)



5. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)



6. Procedural Safeguards

To help parents understand how these principles of the law affect their children this Guide has been organized around these principles. You will see the above symbols above throughout the text highlighting these important principles.



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What role do parents play in the special education process?
→


→
Does my child have the right to attend meetings or have a voice in the special education process?
→

→
What is a Parent Advisory Council?
→

Parent and Student Participation

Parents and students are partners with the school district throughout the entire special education process. As a parent, you know your child best. You have seen your child in different ways and different situations over time. You have a window on your child's needs that professionals do not have. Schools will ask you: "What are your biggest concerns? What do you hope to see your child accomplish?" The special education law provides protections to make sure your concerns are listened to and addressed in the special education process.

Students are the focus of the special education process. The Team should be aware of the interests and concerns of the student, no matter what their age. Moreover, as the student grows older active participation of the student is important. In fact, once the student is 14 years of age (or earlier, if appropriate), the law instructs the Team to include the student at the meetings as an active participant. As members of the Team, the student and parent have a voice in all discussions.

When the student is 17 years old, the school district must discuss with both the student and the parent the change in the rights of the student and the parent(s) that will occur on the student's 18th birthday. In Massachusetts, at age 18 the student reaches the age of majority and is considered an adult. The student is thus able to make his or her own medical and educational decisions. This includes agreeing or not agreeing to the special education services proposed by the school district. The age of majority is discussed in more detail in this Guide in the section on "Procedural Safeguards" (see pg. 29). 

In addition to parents participating in the special education process on behalf of their child, they may also participate in their local Parent Advisory Council (PAC). The PAC helps to guide the special education services provided to all eligible students in a school system. In Massachusetts, each school system is required by state law to have a PAC. The purpose of the PAC is to allow parents of students with disabilities the opportunity to talk about common areas of interest and to advise the school committee about the education and well-being of students with disabilities.

As we move forward in describing other principles of the law, it is important to remember that parent and student participation in the special education decision-making process is vital to each of these principles.

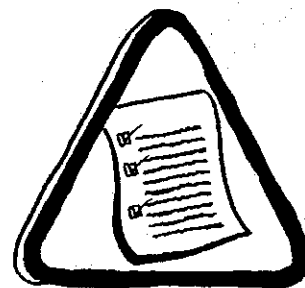
Appropriate Evaluation

The law provides a number of protections to ensure that each student receives regular, appropriate, and comprehensive evaluations. Before a determination can be made as to whether or not a student is eligible for special education, an evaluation of the student's educational strengths and needs must occur.

If your child is having difficulty in school, you may want to talk with the school about why your child may be having difficulty before making a referral for a special education evaluation. When a student shows signs of difficulty in school, one of the first steps may be to observe the student in the classroom or other areas of the school to see if changes might be made that will help the student do better. Sometimes students will do much better simply by changing seats in the classroom, or by having the teacher discuss the daily schedule each morning. Sometimes the school may suggest that a vision screening may be helpful.

Other changes may include trying new ways to teach your child or finding different ways your child can express what has been learned. The teacher may change the way the classroom is set up or may arrange for extra help from other school professionals. These supports or changes in the classroom are known as instructional supports.


If some type of change has been made, it should be reviewed within four to six weeks to see if the change was helpful to the student. If your child continues to have difficulty, a referral for special education evaluation should be considered. You can make a referral for special education at any time. Providing instructional support cannot be used to delay the evaluation of a student. If a student is referred for an evaluation, documentation of the use of instructional supports is part of the evaluation information reviewed by the Team.



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**What should I do if
my child is having
problems in school?**
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**My school wants to
provide "Instructional
Supports" before
making a referral for
special education.
What does this mean?**
←

How do I make a referral for a special education evaluation?

You can make a referral yourself, or you may find that a teacher or other professional has made a referral for a special education evaluation. Referrals are made by contacting the principal, school personnel, or the school's administrator of special education and asking for an evaluation for special education eligibility. **No matter who makes a referral, the parent must give consent in writing before a special education evaluation can begin.** The school must contact you **within five school days** of receiving the referral asking for your written permission to begin the evaluation. 



DISABILITY TYPES in the Massachusetts State Special Education Regulations are:

- Autism
- Developmental Delay
- Intellectual Impairment
- Sensory Impairment
Hearing/Vision/Deaf-Blind
- Neurological Impairment
- Emotional Impairment
- Communication Impairment
- Physical Impairment
- Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability

603 CMR 28.02

Referral for a special education evaluation is the first step in the process of determining if your child should receive special education services. The evaluation should examine all areas of suspected disability and provide a detailed description of your child's educational needs. The evaluation should answer these questions:

1. Does the child have a disability? What type?
2. Does the disability cause the child to be unable to progress effectively in regular education?
3. Does the child require specially designed instruction to make progress or does the child require a related service or services in order to access the general curriculum?

The answer to each of these questions should be "yes" in order to determine that a child is eligible for special education services. The law states that lack of instruction in English or mathematics cannot be the only reason that a student is found eligible for special education, nor can the fact that a student has limited skills in speaking or understanding English if he or she speaks and understands another language. Students also cannot be determined eligible for special education just because they cannot follow the school's discipline code or because they are "socially maladjusted." For students not found to be eligible for special education the Team should explore other programs and supports available within the school.

What is a pre-evaluation conference?

Many families are not familiar with the evaluation process. When your child is referred for evaluation, you may request a pre-evaluation conference to talk with a school professional about your concerns, what kinds of assessments will be

helpful, and who will conduct the assessments. While the school must talk with you about these things whether or not you meet, a pre-evaluation conference can also serve as an opportunity to prepare yourself and your child to better understand the assessments that will be conducted. Once you feel comfortable that you understand and agree with the types of assessments that will be conducted and the individuals who will be conducting the assessments you must provide written consent in order for the evaluation to begin.

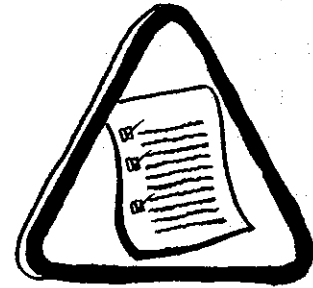
Evaluation frequently includes parent input and teacher observation of the student, an interview with the student about their current abilities in school, and other types of formal and informal assessments. Evaluations are always conducted by qualified professionals and are provided by the school at no cost to the parent.

The evaluation tools used will be based on your child's individual needs. Your child must be evaluated in all the areas of suspected disability. This may include looking at how your child communicates and understands language, your child's educational development, and how your child thinks, behaves, and adapts to changes. Evaluations may look at your child's health, vision, hearing, social and emotional well-being, performance in school, how your child uses her/his body, and for older students, what job-related and other post-school interests and abilities your child has.

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is an assessment of student behaviors that may be disruptive or otherwise inappropriate for school. The FBA is based on observations and discussions that help to determine when and why a behavior is happening so that positive behavioral interventions may be used to help the student to develop more appropriate behaviors.

All evaluation information is confidential and should be seen only by people directly involved with your child such as teachers and Team members. A parent must give written consent before others may have access to this information.

Evaluations must be completed within 30 school days of the parent's written permission for evaluation. Within 45 school working days of the school's receipt of your permission in



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**What should I expect
as part of the
evaluation process?**
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**Who can see the
evaluation information?**
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**How long will the
evaluation process take?**
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All special education evaluations must be conducted by appropriately credentialed and trained specialists and must include the following:

Specialist Assessment(s): An assessment in all areas related to a suspected disability.*

Educational Assessment: An assessment that includes information about the student's educational history and overall progress, including current educational standing in key curriculum areas. This assessment should also include information on the student's attention skills, participation behaviors, communication skills, memory, and social relations with groups, peers, and adults. This assessment should also include a narrative description of the student's educational and developmental potential.


The following assessments may be included with parental consent if the school or the parent asks for them:

Health Assessment: An assessment to identify any medical problems that may affect the student's learning. Health assessments may be done by a school-referred or family physician and should be reviewed by the school nurse.

Psychological Assessment: An assessment to consider the student's learning abilities and style in relationship to his or her social/emotional development and skills.

Home Assessment: An assessment of family history that may affect the student's learning or behavior of the student at home, and may include a home visit.

* See also "Disability Types" chart on page 12.

writing, a Team meeting must be held to talk about the evaluations to determine eligibility and to complete the IEP for an eligible student. 

Parents have the right to receive all special education evaluation reports two days before the Team meeting. You must ask the school for copies of these reports in order to receive them in advance of the meeting. It is important for parents to review the evaluation reports before the Team meeting. A person qualified to explain these reports will be at the Team meeting to answer any questions you may have about what the results mean, where your child is having trouble and why.

→
**What does the term
"Team" mean?**
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It takes many people to plan and provide the help that your child needs. IDEA clearly specifies the members of a special education Team. The parents are always members of any

Team that makes decisions about their child. Parents can invite others to attend the Team meeting with them. Teachers and other professionals who know your child or who have evaluated your child will also be Team members.



Each Team must include:

You, the parent(s) or guardian(s);

At least one of your child's special education teachers and/or providers;

At least one of your child's regular education teachers if the child is or may be participating in the regular education environment;

Other individuals or agencies, invited by the parent or the school district;

Someone to interpret the evaluation results and explain what services may be needed; and


Your child if they are between the ages of 14-22 (More Information on Transition to Adult Living or What is transition planning for older children? see pg 26.);

In addition, other people or agencies that have special expertise or knowledge of your child.

from IDEA

Each Team must have one member who knows what services and resources are available to the school district. The law requires that this individual have the authority to commit the resources of the school district so that decisions about services can be made at the Team meeting.


At the Team meeting, the members of the Team must consider all information and evaluation results to decide if the student is eligible for special education services.

Based on the Team discussion and the evaluation information, the Team will determine if your child is eligible for special education and related services. If your child is eligible the Team will then use the evaluation results to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child. For more information, turn to the "IEP" section of this Guide (see pg. 19). 

If your child is found **not eligible**, your child may still receive help, although not special education services. If your child is not eligible for special education services, you

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What is the role of the Team in determining eligibility for special education?
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will receive a letter from the school stating that your child is not eligible, detailing why the student was found not eligible, along with information about your rights. Read the notice carefully to decide if you agree or disagree with this decision. You have the right to appeal a finding of no eligibility. For information on your rights, turn to the "Procedural Safeguards" section of this Guide (see pg. 29). 


If your child is **eligible** for special education the special education services should begin immediately after you sign the IEP. Evaluation will continue to be an important part of the special education process. At least every three years, the school district must conduct a three-year reevaluation. This means that at least every three years, the Team must consider current evaluation information and must determine if your child remains eligible for special education.

→
What is a three-year reevaluation?

Is it required?

→
Every three years the school will request your consent to conduct a three-year reevaluation. The school can also recommend to you that the evaluation information they have is sufficient to know that your child continues to be eligible and is also current enough to write an appropriate IEP. In that case, the school may recommend that no assessments are necessary. This helps to prevent "over-testing", but it should not prevent evaluation that you or the school believes is needed. You have the right to say you still want some or all of the assessments to be certain that the information is current; the school must provide the assessments that you request. A three-year reevaluation generally will include all of the types of assessments of the initial evaluation.

→
Is reevaluation required if the district "removes" my child from special education?

→
If, at any time, the district believes that your child no longer requires special education, they must request your consent for a complete reevaluation prior to taking any action to end special education services. At that time, the Team must consider the evaluation information and can make a determination that the student is no longer eligible. As always, you must receive a letter or notice in writing about this type of decision and have the right to disagree or to appeal the decision. 

→
What is an "Independent Educational Evaluation"?

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At times you may find that you disagree with the school district's evaluation. The foundation of a good educational program is an evaluation that truly reflects the strengths and needs of the indi-

vidual student. If you disagree with the school district's evaluation results you have the right to have your child evaluated by a qualified professional(s) not employed by the school system. Both federal and state law allows parents to seek an **Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)**.

In Massachusetts, special education regulations, 603 CMR 28.04 offer parents a choice when exploring options for the payment of Independent Evaluations. Parents may choose to share their personal financial information with the district, and share the cost of the evaluation based on their income. If the Family is income eligible the district must pay for the evaluation and may not take the family to hearing over the cost of the evaluation. Parents may also choose not to share their financial information with the district. Then the district must choose to either pay for the entire Independent Educational Evaluation or move forward to a hearing at the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA). All IEEs that are publicly funded, in whole or in part, must meet state requirements for using evaluators who are registered, certified, licensed or otherwise approved and who agree to abide by rates set by the state agency responsible for setting such rates.

According to state regulations, any student eligible for free or reduced cost lunch or who is in the custody of a state agency with an appointed Educational Surrogate Parent is entitled to receive an equivalent IEE at public expense. School districts must offer parents seeking public funding for IEEs information about the sliding fee program. Participation in the sliding fee program, other than for students who are eligible for free or reduced cost lunch, requires the family to provide financial documentation.

Upon receipt of the family financial documents, the district must promptly evaluate the information and inform families of their status. The school should return the financial documents immediately to the family. No copies of financial statements should be made; the district, however, will document eligibility for the sliding scale fee in the student's record. Based on this financial information, the family and the district will share the cost of the IEE. For example, as of September, 2001, for a family with an income below 400% of the federal poverty level (\$68,200 for a family of four) the IEE will be

Who pays for an independent evaluator?



SLIDING FEE SCALE

When parents seek public funding for an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) the district shall consider family size and family income information in relation to Federal Poverty Guidelines:

- If the family income is equal to or less than 400% of the federal poverty guidelines, the district shall pay 100% of the costs of an IEE.
- If the family income is between 400% and 500% of the federal poverty guidelines, the district shall pay 75% of the costs of an IEE.
- If the family income is between 500% and 600% of the federal poverty guidelines, the district shall pay 50% of the costs of an IEE.
- If the family income is over 600% of the federal poverty guidelines, the district shall have no obligation to cost-share with the parent.
- 400% of the federal poverty level is currently (as of September 2001) \$68,200 for a family of four.

*Mass. Special Education Regulations
603 CMR 28.04(5)*

The parents of a child with a disability have the right to obtain an Independent Educational Evaluation.

If a parent requests an Independent Educational Evaluation at public expense, the public agency must without unnecessary delay either initiate a hearing to show that its evaluation is appropriate or ensure that an Independent Educational Evaluation is provided at public expense.

(IDEA 300.502)

provided at no cost. For a family with an income above that level the amount paid by the family is based on a sliding-fee scale.

In cases where students are not eligible for the sliding fee program, the parents do not wish to provide financial documentation, or parents are requesting an evaluation in an area not assessed by the school district, IDEA provides that families may still request public funding of an IEE. Upon such a request, the school district must, within five school days, either agree to pay for the IEE or initiate a hearing with the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA). The district will need to show the BSEA that its evaluation is comprehensive and appropriate. If the BSEA agrees that the evaluation done by the district was comprehensive and appropriate, the district will not be obligated to publicly fund the IEE. However if the BSEA determines that the district's evaluation was not comprehensive and appropriate the district will be obligated to pay for the IEE.


NOTE: Parents always have the right to obtain an IEE at their own expense. Parents may choose to pay for an IEE because they want a more in-depth evaluation than the school can do, or because insurance will cover the cost. If you pay for the IEE, the resulting reports belong to you; you may choose or may not choose to share the results with your district. The Team must consider the results of any IEE that is made available to them when planning services for your child.

How is information from an IEE used?

The district must reconvene the IEP Team and consider the information from an IEE as carefully as it considers the information from an evaluation done by the school district. The law requires consideration of evaluation information from more than a single source or assessment, in order to have a complete picture of the student and his or her abilities. All results from assessments or from IEEs together will be used by the Team to form the basis for the decisions made regarding your child's participation in special education services.

For more details, see the Parent's Rights Brochure for parents of students with disabilities provided by your district.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed at the Team meeting and represents a formal agreement about the services that the school will provide for your child's special education needs. The IEP is a contract between you and the school. As with any contract you should make sure you fully understand the terms to which you are agreeing and make certain that everything that was agreed to verbally is written in the contract. 

Input from parents and students is key IEP information.

The first part of the IEP requests information regarding the concerns of the parent and/or student, key evaluation results, and the future vision for the student. This is an opportunity for you, as a parent, to talk about your concerns and what you want special education to accomplish for your child. Consider: What information from the evaluation report seems particularly important? Has your child expressed some particular concerns or desires that you think can be helped by special education? Are there areas of particular strength or weakness of the student that you want to make sure are included? In addition, the Team should consider all information including the student's medical and educational history and personal interests. This discussion provides an opportunity for you and the school to discuss what special education can do and what it might not be able to do. This part of the IEP process can also be an opportunity for you and your child to express thoughts about the educational program as it has been in the past and how it could change to better meet your child's needs.

Student Vision: Parents and students should enter the Team meeting prepared to talk about their hopes and dreams for the child's future. If the student is able to indicate what he/she would like, then the student's vision should be clearly indicated, if not the vision will be developed by the family. In discussing a vision for the future, the Team should be careful not to limit the discussion only to what they believe is "realistic"—everyone needs to have dreams and wishes. The law provides that those dreams and wishes should help to point out a direction for the Team. This vision should guide the Team throughout the IEP



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How can I make sure that my concerns are part of the IEP process?
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development process in order to create a program that will bring the student closer to that vision in a meaningful way and help the student to see how education can help the student reach his or her personal goals.

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Does the IEP determine the subjects and information my child will learn?
—————→

Participation in the General Curriculum: The federal law, IDEA, states that students with disabilities should participate in the general curriculum. The term "General Curriculum" means the same curriculum that their non-disabled peers are learning. The IEP, therefore, does NOT design a curriculum, rather, the IEP designs the services that the student needs to enable them to make progress in the general curriculum, and to help them be successful in the life of the school. For students with disabilities to access the information in the general curriculum, Teams may find it necessary to identify accommodations, modifications, or services to meet specific learning needs.




In order to be informed members of the IEP Team, parents should be aware of the curriculum that their school district uses for students who are the same age and grade level as their child and understand how their child's disability affects their involvement and progress in the general curriculum. The school district must ensure that a person on the Team is available who understands the general curriculum and can be helpful in discussing how the student can participate in the general curriculum.


In Massachusetts, the general curriculum is based on learning standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks which define specific student learning expectations for each grade. Parents should be aware of how these frameworks are utilized in their school district to create the grade specific curriculum for all students.

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What if my child has special needs in areas besides academics?
—————→

Other Educational Needs: Students with disabilities who are found eligible for special education often have areas of need beyond the general curriculum. These areas of "Other Educational Need" must also be addressed in the IEP. The Massachusetts IEP form lists a number of Other Educational Needs that may be discussed depending on the individual needs of the student. The lists in the IEP form can help the Team to think through some of the possible areas but should

not be considered the only options. In brief, do not limit your discussion to only the curriculum. For example, you may need to talk about behavior, communication, assistive technology, use of Braille, or other special considerations unique to the student. 

When considering both the general curriculum and other educational needs, the Team will consider specific accommodations, modifications, and services to assist the student to reach their best educational performance. The Team considers whether it is necessary to adapt the content (change the complexity of information being taught). The Team also considers whether it is necessary to adapt the methodology or delivery of instruction (change in the way the information is taught) or the performance criteria of the classroom (change the way the student expresses what they have learned). All of the changes and services that the Team identifies are written in the IEP. The IEP then serves as a resource to assist the teacher in providing a supportive and effective classroom environment throughout the school year.

IDEA notes some special considerations for Teams to address during IEP development. These special considerations include: positive behavioral interventions, the unique needs of students with disabilities with limited English proficiency, the communication needs of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, Braille for students with visual impairments, and assistive technology devices and services for all students. These needs should be addressed by the Team, and included in the IEP based on the unique needs of the child. 

Annual Goals: Once the Team has explored the student's current educational performance and the types of assistance the student will need to improve his or her progress, the Team will turn its attention to what the student can be expected to be doing during the year in order to demonstrate effective progress. The specific goals for your child's performance will be described in a section of the IEP called Annual Goals. Annual Goals describe the expected growth in your child's skills and knowledge over the next year as a result of the special education that he or she receives. Goals should be positive, measurable, achievable, and challenging. Annual Goals should be written so that every member of the team can determine if the child has met the goal, not

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How does the Team identify what should be done?
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Are there any special considerations that should be addressed in the IEP?
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What are Annual Goals?
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just the specialist in the goal focus area. Annual Goals should relate to the academic and/or non-academic needs of your child.



A good goal has five essential parts and may be determined by answering these simple questions.

- Who? - your child
- What will be achieved? - skill or behavior
- How? - in what manner or to what level?
- Where? - in what setting or under what conditions?
- When? - at what point in the IEP period ?

→
**What are Benchmarks?
How are they different
from Objectives?**
→


Measurable Annual Goals are broken down into smaller pieces called objectives or benchmarks. They begin with what your child can do (present level of performance) and are observable accomplishments. Objectives are the smaller steps or milestones your child needs to make in order to reach the annual goals written on their IEP. Benchmarks are based upon achieving a specific skill in a specific period of time. Benchmarks allow for regular checks of progress in meeting annual goals with the final benchmark being the goal for the year. An IEP Team may use either objectives or benchmarks or a combination of the two depending on the nature of the goals and the student's needs.

→
**How will I know
what services my
child will receive?**
→

Services: After the student's educational performance has been discussed and annual goals developed, the Team must consider the actual services the student needs in order to achieve these goals during the next year. The Team should talk about all the supports and services that will allow the student to succeed in school. The Team will discuss necessary services, including special teaching services, consultative services, training for teachers, and other related or supportive services such as transportation, psychological services, counseling services, and orientation and mobility services. The Team will specify these services on a one-page form in the IEP called the "Service Delivery" page of the Massachusetts IEP. This page identifies all the services that will be provided for the student during the school year that will assist the student to achieve the goals identified on the IEP.



The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the state's student testing program. Tests are given at different grade levels and are based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science & Technology/Engineering and History and Social Science. **All students in Massachusetts receiving an education at public expense must participate in state assessment.**

Both IDEA and the Massachusetts Education Reform Act require that all students participate in MCAS. In the past, participation in statewide assessments was not always considered important for students with disabilities. It was assumed that special education evaluations provided enough information on how well students were doing in school. Special education evaluations, however, do not typically provide information on what students know and can do relative to local and state academic learning standards. Information about the general performance of students with disabilities means that schools will now be held accountable in the same way they are for the performance of non-disabled students. It is important to ensure that all students have access to the resources and supports needed to pass the MCAS, including students with disabilities. 

By including all students in MCAS, schools are more likely to raise standards and have higher expectations for students with disabilities. Including students with disabilities in the MCAS encourages schools to develop new programs and methods of teaching students with diverse learning styles. It also encourages the inclusion of students with disabilities in activities with their non-disabled peers.

As part of the IEP process, the Team must determine how your child will participate in MCAS. The Team first will consider whether your child can take standard MCAS tests either with or without accommodations. If your child requires accommodations, then the Team will identify the accommodations that will be used and must document this information in the student's IEP. Generally, they will be similar to those accommodations that the student uses during regular classroom instruction.

What about the IEP and state and district wide testing—for instance, the MCAS test?

All students receiving an education at public expense must participate in the state assessment program known as "MCAS."

Students will participate in MCAS in one of three ways:

- On-demand MCAS Test under Routine Conditions
- On-demand MCAS Test with Accommodations
- MCAS Alternate Assessment

The Team will determine how a student will participate in MCAS.

Why is it important to participate in MCAS testing?




A small number of students may be unable to take standard MCAS tests, even with accommodations, due to the nature and severity of their disability. These students will be designated by the Team to participate in the MCAS Alternate Assessment. The MCAS Alternate Assessment is a portfolio, or collection of information about the student's accomplishments throughout the school year, that is assembled by the child's teacher. The portfolio will document how well the child has demonstrated his or her knowledge and skills related to the learning standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in the four subjects assessed by standard MCAS tests. The alternate assessment will not depend on your child's ability to take a paper/pencil test, because it uses other methods to determine the child's level of performance. The alternate assessment portfolio is submitted to the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) and is scored by panels of Massachusetts educators. Scores are reported to parents, schools, and districts along with other MCAS test results. Secondary school students obtaining a passing score on the alternate assessment will be eligible for a standard diploma.

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How will my child participate in MCAS?
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For further details on participation in MCAS, available test accommodations, and alternate assessments, please refer to the DOE publication entitled "Requirements for the Participation of Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Educators and Parents," available on the DOE web page at www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/parents.html.

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When do I receive a copy of the IEP?
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Either at the Team meeting, or immediately after, but no later than 45 school days after the parents written consent to evaluation, the school district will provide you with a copy of the IEP. The IEP tells you how the school proposes to help your child. Within 30 days of receiving the IEP from the school, you must sign and return it to the school. **The signature of the parent or adult student must appear on the IEP before services can begin.** If you have questions about the IEP, you can talk with the school contact person, generally the Team Chairperson. 

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Once we've developed the IEP, do services begin immediately?
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If the IEP is satisfactory you should accept the IEP by checking the box on IEP page 8 which states "I accept the IEP as developed" and signing on the line below. When the district receives your consent, services will begin immediately. If the IEP is unsatisfactory you must choose between the two remaining options. You may check the box stating "I reject the IEP as

developed," in which case the last agreed upon IEP will generally remain in effect until an agreement has been made regarding the appropriate services for your child (sometimes called "stay put"). If your child was not previously receiving special education services, no special education services will be provided until an IEP is agreed upon and signed by the parent. For this reason, it is sometimes best to accept an IEP in part, in order that some services can begin. To do this, check the box stating "I reject the following portions of the IEP with the understanding that any portion(s) that I do not reject will be considered accepted and implemented immediately." You should then list your concerns and sign below. The accepted portions of the IEP must begin immediately upon your consent. The IEP form also allows you to request a meeting with the school to discuss the rejected IEP or rejected portions.

Once you accept the IEP, the school district must share the IEP with all of the school staff who have responsibility for working with your child.

Remember that your signature is required to accept the IEP as well as to reject the IEP. The parent's signature on a rejected IEP sets into motion a referral to the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA). The BSEA offers mediation services to parents and schools and has authority to conduct hearings to resolve special education disputes. For more information on the BSEA turn to the section on "Procedural Safeguards" (see pg. 29).



Measuring Progress: It is good practice for schools to provide grades for students with disabilities, in addition to progress reports. Grades provide parents with information on how their child is progressing in the general curriculum; progress reports indicate a student's progress only in achieving IEP goals. The Team should discuss the grading system while looking at specially designed instruction options during the Team meeting.

Progress reports allow you to check on your child's progress toward the IEP goals at set times throughout the year. You must receive a progress report as often as all children in your school district receive report cards or other school-wide progress reports. Special education progress reports will help you decide whether or not your

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**What if I don't agree
with part or all of
the proposed IEP?**
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**How will I know how
my child is doing?**
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child is making progress toward the annual goals that were developed. If your child is not making the expected progress you should speak with your child's special education teacher or ask the Team to meet again to discuss whether changes in the IEP are needed. If changes are needed they must be agreed to by the parent. **The district cannot make any change to the current IEP without notifying you and getting your written consent.**

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How often will the IEP be reviewed?
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The Team must meet at least once a year to review your child's IEP, to determine if changes need to be made, and to develop new annual goals. Whenever there are questions, concerns, or changes in your child's academic, social, or emotional well-being, you and your child's teacher or school contact person should talk. If you or the school decide the IEP is not working for your child, or expected progress is not occurring, the Team should meet to review and possibly change the IEP.

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What is transition planning for older students?
→

Effective transition planning is based upon the student's goals or vision. IDEA requires that, beginning at age 14, planning for the transition to adult living must be part of the IEP. Your child should be invited to attend Team meetings. For students who may be receiving services from adult service agencies, representatives of these agencies should also be invited to the Team meeting when transition is being discussed. When your child is age 16, the Team discussion of Vision should include a post-school vision statement designed to reflect the individual interests, preferences, and needs of your child in adult life. Transition planning and services should be reflected in the **Other Educational Needs** section of the IEP and can include preparation for post-secondary education, vocational training, employment, and independent living. 


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People tell me that special education is an entitlement but adult services are not. What does that mean?
→


During transition planning it is important to remember that when students with disabilities graduate from school or turn 22 years of age, they are no longer entitled to special education services under IDEA. Massachusetts has a planning process to identify possible needed services from adult human service agencies for students with significant disabilities; this is known as Chapter 688 planning. A Chapter 688 Referral should be made by the school two years before your child graduates from high school or turns twenty-two, if services from an adult agency will be needed. Planning for adult

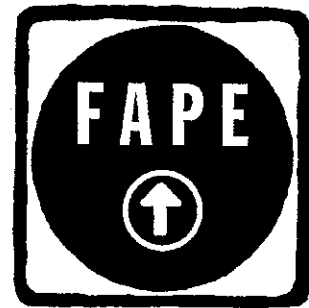
services, however, and completing the referral process does not necessarily guarantee that services will be available. Unlike special education, human services for adults are not provided as an entitlement and may have waiting lists, even for people eligible for services. Therefore, it is important for families to begin exploring the adult service system before adult services will be needed.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

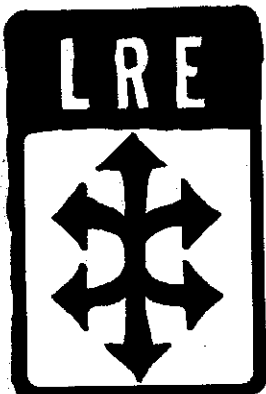
A child who is eligible for special education services is entitled by federal law to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). FAPE ensures that all students with disabilities receive an appropriate public education at no expense to the family. FAPE differs for each student because each student has unique needs. FAPE specifies that needed services must be provided without cost to the family.

FAPE guarantees that for students who are found eligible for special education, school districts must be prepared to provide services according to an IEP beginning no later than their third birthday. If a student continues to be eligible, services may continue until the student graduates from high school with a standard diploma or turns 22, whichever comes first. 

FAPE also means that students receiving special education services have access to and make meaningful progress in the general curriculum (i.e. the same curriculum as students without disabilities) and the right to be full participants in the life of the school. Your child is not only entitled to access the academic portion of school but also to participate in extracurricular and other activities sponsored by the school. Full participation means that students with disabilities are entitled to the aids and services needed to assist them in participating in all areas of school life. FAPE is closely tied to a principle known as the "Least Restrictive Environment" which is described in detail in the next section of this Guide. 



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**What does FAPE
guarantee my child?**
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Who determines what is the least restrictive environment for my child?

How is that determination made?

Least Restrictive Environment

The federal law, IDEA, mandates that students with disabilities must be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate based on the student's needs. This is known as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The Team (including the parent) determines the placement that the student needs to provide the services on the student's IEP and the Team must choose the least restrictive environment able to provide those services. This means that the student should attend the school he or she would attend if non-disabled, unless the Team determines that the nature of the student's disability will not allow that student to have a successful educational experience in that environment.

FAPE and LRE are closely tied together. Both federal and Massachusetts special education laws require that a Team consider appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. In order to help your child be successful, the Team must carefully consider whether supplemental aids and services and specialized instruction could make it possible for your child to be educated with non-disabled peers. If services can be appropriately provided in a less restrictive setting, the Team must choose that type of program and setting. If the student's program requires a more restrictive setting to be successful, then the Team may consider other settings. The Team should look class by class, activity by activity, and only remove your child from the general education classrooms if, and only if, supplemental aids and services would not make it possible for the student to remain in that classroom and make effective progress.



Determination of the LRE is based on your child's IEP, not on a diagnosis or specific disability label. This determination must be made individually and carefully. Students cannot be placed in separate or more restrictive environments only because they require modification of the curriculum. It is important to remember that Teams do not have to choose between specialized help for a student and inclusion of that student in the general education classroom; students are entitled to both. After the Team has developed the IEP and understands the needs and goals for your child, then the Team will determine the most appropriate setting for your child's services. LRE is an integral part of the placement determination.

Procedural Safeguards

Specific procedures that protect the rights of students and parents with disabilities are meant to help make the complicated special education process more predictable and dependable. They are designed to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed and that special education and related services are individualized for each student.

Some of the procedural safeguards that have already been mentioned in this Guide include:

Timelines - examples include:

- Credentialed, trained specialists complete evaluations within 30 school days from written consent for evaluation;
- Teams meet to determine eligibility and if eligible, to develop the proposed IEP for the students, and provide copies of that IEP to the parents within 45 school days from written consent for evaluation;
- School sends IEP to parent immediately following it's development at the Team meeting
- Parent accepts or rejects IEP within 30 days of receipt.

Consent - The parent has the right to consent or refuse consent at key points such as:

- Evaluation
- IEP services
- Placement decisions

Evaluation requirements - The specific required evaluations and the requirements relating to doing appropriate evaluations are also safeguards (see "Appropriate Evaluation," pg. 11).

IEP Development - Many of the elements of the IEP function as safeguards for the student to ensure that services are comprehensive and individualized.

Procedural safeguards relate to many aspects of the special education process, including eligibility, evaluation, IEP, placement or the provision of special education. For example, one of the key safeguards for parents is the right to receive written notice whenever a school district proposes or refuses to initiate



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What are some of the procedural safeguards?
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When do I get a copy of the Parent's Rights Brochure?
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or change key aspects of a student's services. Parents are encouraged to carefully review the "Parent's Rights Brochure" which has been prepared as one means of informing parents of their rights in the special education process. The "Parent's Rights Brochure" is made available to parents at any time upon request to the school district and is always provided by the school when an initial request for an evaluation is received and at other times during the IEP process.

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Do my child's rights change with age?
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Students, as we discussed in the section on parent and student participation, are central to the process, and any rights that parents have flow from the right of the student to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education. As students grow older, their participation in the planning for the special education services that they receive becomes more active, including participating on the Team by age 14 (or younger if appropriate) and the transfer of rights from the parent to the student at the age of majority.

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What is the "age of majority"?
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In Massachusetts, 18 years of age is the "age of majority." Unless there has been court action giving guardianship to another adult, at 18 years of age students are considered adults and competent to make their own decisions, regardless of the severity of their disability, including decisions in all special education matters. The Massachusetts IEP form offers students age 18 and older the opportunity to delegate responsibility, if they wish. Parents and students must be notified about this transfer of rights to the student and the impact on the student and the parents at least one year before the student turns 18. When the student turns 18, he or she has full authority to consent to, or refuse, services. The school district cannot assume that the services will be acceptable to the adult student; therefore, the district will need to seek consent of the student for all IEP services when the student turns 18 years of age. Neither the parent nor the school district can reverse the decision of the adult student unless there is a court-appointed guardian. The student is responsible for signing the IEP, and, as with any adult, the student can withdraw his or her willingness to share or delegate these decisions at any time. When students reach the age of majority, parents continue to have the right to receive all written notices and to have access to the student's school records. Guardianship is complex and, therefore, we recommend that anyone questioning the need for a guardian for their child should consult an attorney (see Resources on pg. 35 for free and low cost services).

Procedural safeguards also protect the rights of non-English speaking students and families. If English is not your primary language, the school must provide an interpreter to you at no charge. Written documents such as the IEP and evaluation reports must also be translated into your native language. If you are unable to read in any language or have a visual or hearing impairment, the school is required to make every effort to be responsive to those needs. Efforts may include the use of Braille, sign language, orally translating written language, or providing other means of communication that is effective and allows you to understand the information and communicate with the school.

Some students with disabilities are able to succeed in school without special education but require some kind of supportive service or accommodation. A law known as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 offers students with disabilities both services and accommodations that are necessary for the student to participate fully in the life of the school. To receive services under Section 504 a student must have a mental or physical impairment, that substantially impairs a major life activity, and requires special accommodations. Major life activities include functions such as breathing, walking, learning, caring for one's self, seeing, speaking, performing manual tasks, hearing, and working. Like IDEA, a Section 504 Plan guarantees students with disabilities the right to FAPE.

Section 504 offers a Team approach, a written plan, appropriate accommodations, services, and programs, and periodic review of services. A "504 Plan" can assure students with disabilities the opportunity to join in all aspects of school life. Accommodations in non-academic and extracurricular activities, adaptive equipment or assistive technology devices, an aide, assistance with health needs, school transportation or other related services are possible 504 accommodations.

It is important to discuss your concerns and areas of disagreement with the school before entering into more formal due process procedures. This can often be the quickest and easiest way to solve a disagreement. If you cannot come to agreement with the school, you have the right to disagree with the school's decisions concerning your child. This includes decisions about:

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Are there special safeguards for students or families whose primary language is not English?
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What if my child is not found eligible for Special Education?
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What is a 504 Plan?
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What if I disagree with the school about what is right for my child?
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- Your child's eligibility for special education;
- Your child's special education evaluation;
- The special education and related services that the school provides to your child; or
- Your child's educational placement.

What will the State Department of Education do if I disagree with the school district?

If you are unhappy with any of these areas, you have several options. The first option is to meet with the special education administrator at your school and try to reach an agreement about your child's needs and services. Local school districts often have specific local procedures to resolve the complaints of parents. Ask if your district has those procedures.

The law provides for a Problem Resolution System at the state level. In Massachusetts, the Problem Resolution System is administered by the office of Program Quality Assurance (PQA) at the Department of Education. Parents can call PQA to ask a question regarding the laws and regulations pertaining to a specific concern. In order to have a complaint formally reviewed by PQA staff, a complaint must be filed in writing. (See page 35 for contact information).

The PQA education specialist will review your complaint to determine if education laws and regulations are being followed. Parents and school officials will have an opportunity to provide written information and to speak with the PQA specialist about the issue(s) presented. At the completion of the review, a letter explaining the results of the review and the actions taken to resolve the issue(s) is sent to the parents. If the school is not meeting the requirements of the law, DOE will make a finding of non-compliance with the law and will work with the school to correct the problem.

Parents of children with disabilities have different choices available to them for resolving disputes with schools concerning the education of their children. Parents may contact PQA (as described above) or the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA) about any matter concerning the identification, evaluation services, or placement of their child.

The BSEA is an independent organization located with the Massachusetts Department of Education. It is notified by the school system of all signed rejected IEPs. Within five school

days of receiving written notice of a rejected IEP, the school district must send notification of the rejection to the BSEA. The BSEA offers several dispute resolution options. Any parent can use one or all of these options. More than one option may be used when needed. These options include:

Mediation: a voluntary and informal process where you and the school meet with an impartial mediator to talk openly about the areas where you disagree and to try to reach an agreement.

Advisory Opinion: a process where you and the school agree to each present information in a limited amount of time to an impartial Hearing Officer, who will give an opinion as to how the law would apply to the situation as presented. An advisory opinion is not written, nor is it binding, and allows either the parent or the district to proceed to a hearing if either party is dissatisfied.

Hearing: a process where you and the district each present your case to an impartial Hearing Officer for a written binding decision on the best outcome for the student. A hearing is a fairly complex legal proceeding and averages three to five days in length.

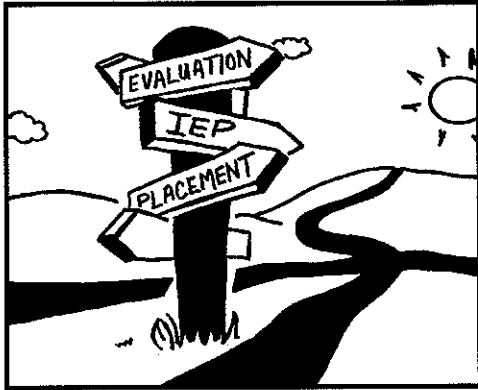
Generally, parents who proceed with the due process system consult an attorney or seek representation. For information on free or low cost legal services see the Resources section on page 35 of the Guide. At any point that you contact the BSEA, it will provide you with written information on your rights and responsibilities.

When there is a dispute between the parent and the school district related to an eligible student, if the parent or the district seeks to resolve the dispute through an appeal to the BSEA, the student is entitled to "stay put." "Stay put" means that the eligible student is entitled to continue to receive the IEP services and placement that were previously agreed to by the parent until either the dispute is resolved through the BSEA, or the parent agrees to other services or placement.

We hope that the need for filing complaints, or participating in hearings, will be rare. The best defense against misunderstanding is good information and communication. We hope this Guide will continue to serve as a resource to you in understanding special education.

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**What does the Bureau
of Special Education
Appeals do?**
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**What happens to my
child's educational
services while the
school and I resolve
our differences?**
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Conclusion

As a collaborative effort by the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Federation for Children with Special Needs, this Guide has been developed as an introduction and overview to receiving special education services under federal and state law. There have been many recent changes to the laws guiding special education in Massachusetts and across the country. It is important to provide information and training for families and school systems alike regarding those changes. Twenty-five years of special education services in Massachusetts have developed tremendous resources available for the education of children with disabilities. We hope that this Guide helps you understand some of the complexities of the special education law and process and helps you to assist your child in reaching his or her individual educational potential.

The state and federal Departments of Education are among the agencies that provide funding to the Federation for Children with Special Needs, so that it may provide training and technical assistance to families of children with special needs. The Federation's statewide training workshops provide more detailed information pertaining to topics mentioned in this Guide. For further information, contact the Federation at 1-800-331-0688 or at www.fcsn.org. The resources listed in the Appendix that follows may provide additional assistance.

Resources

Federation for Children with Special Needs

(800) 331-0688
TTY (617) 236-7210
1135 Tremont Street, Ste. 420
Boston, MA 02120
www.fcsn.org

Federation Satellite Offices:

Hyannis: 508-778-0442
Worcester: 508-798-0531
Northampton: 413-585-8140

Disability Law Center*

(800) 872-9992
VOICE/TTY (617) 723-8455
11 Beacon Street, Suite 925(800) 872-9992
Boston, MA 02108

Disability Law Center – Western Mass.*

(800) 222-5619
(413) 584-6337
TTY (413) 586-6024
22 Green Street
Northampton, MA 01060

Family Ties

(508) 947-1231
Mass. Department of Public Health
109 Island Road
Lakeville, MA 02347
www.massfamilyties.org

Massachusetts ARC

(781) 891-6270
217 South Street
Waltham, MA 02453

Massachusetts Advocacy Center

(617) 357-8431
TTY (617) 357-8434
100 Boylston Street, Suite 200
Boston, MA 02116

Mass. Association of Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (MASSPAC)

781-784-8316
P.O. Box 167
Sharon, MA 02067
www.masspac.org

Parent Professional Advocacy League (PAL)

(617) 227-2925
15 Court Street, Suite 1060
Boston, MA 02108
www.ppal.net

Parents for Residential Reform

(800) 672-7084
TTY (617) 236-7210
1135 Tremont Street, Ste. 420
Boston, MA 02120
www.pfrr.org

Volunteer Lawyers Project*

(617) 423-0648
TTY (617) 338-6790
(VLP of the Boston Bar Association)
29 Temple Place, 3rd Floor
Boston, MA 02111

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE)

(781) 338-3000
Bureau of Special Education Appeals
(781) 338-6400
Program Quality Assurance
(781) 338-3700
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148
www.doe.mass.edu/sped

*These agencies offer free and low cost legal services for income eligible individuals.

Resources, continued

Bureau of Transitional Planning

(617) 727-7600

*Executive Office of Health and
Human Services*

1 Ashburton Place, Room 1109

Boston, MA 02108

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

(800) 392-6450

TTY (800) 392-6556

88 Kingston Street

Boston MA 02111

Massachusetts Commission for Deaf and Hard of Hearing

(800) 882-1155

TTY (800) 530-7570

210 South Street 5th Floor

Boston MA 02111

Massachusetts Department of Mental Health

(800) 221-0053

25 Staniford Street

Boston, MA 02114

Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation

(617) 727-5608

TTY (617) 727-9866

160 North Washington Street

Boston, MA 02114

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

(617) 624-6000

TTY (617) 624-6001

250 Washington Street

Boston, MA 02108

Massachusetts Department of Social Services

(617) 748-2000

TTY (617) 348-5599

24 Farnsworth Street

Boston, MA 02108

Massachusetts Department of Transition Assistance

(617) 348-8500

TTY (617) 348-5599

600 Washington Street

Boston, MA 02111

Recipient Services: (800) 445-6604

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

(617) 204-3730

Fort Point Place

27-43 Wormwood Street

Boston, MA 02210

U.S. Office for Civil Rights

(617) 223- 9662

FAX (617) 223-9669

U.S. Department of Education

J.W. McCormack P.O.C.H., Room 707

Boston, MA 02109

(for section 504 and ADA complaints)

IDEA and Your Child's Rights

Source: Autism Society of America
www.autism-society.org

The first step in obtaining special education services is for your child to be evaluated. The evaluation can be done when your child is first suspected of having a disability (pre-placement evaluation) or when your child's level of functioning changes in one or more areas (re-evaluation). There are two ways in which a child can be evaluated under the regulations of IDEA:

- The parent can request an evaluation by calling or writing the director of special education or the principal of the child's school. If you call, also put your request in writing, keeping a copy for yourself. This should be part of your routine communication with anyone concerning your child's education. Follow-up all telephone calls with a letter summarizing the conversation. This way, the other party has the opportunity to make corrections to any misunderstood information, and you have a paper trail in case of a disagreement with the school system.
- The school system may also determine that an evaluation is necessary. If so, they must receive written permission from the parent before the evaluation can be conducted.

An evaluation should be conducted by a multidisciplinary team or group of persons, which must include at least one teacher or other specialist with specific knowledge in the area of the suspected disability. IDEA requires that no single procedure be used as the sole criterion for determining an appropriate education program for a child. The law also requires that the child be assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including but not limited to, health, vision, hearing, communication abilities, motor skills, and social and/or emotional status.

If the parents disagree with the results of the evaluation, they may choose to obtain an independent evaluation at public or private expense. A list of professionals that meet state requirements may be requested from your school or you can choose one on your own. If the professional chosen meets appropriate criteria set up by the state, then the school must consider his/her evaluation in developing an IEP.

Re-Evaluation

If a child already receives special education services, the above standards apply for re-evaluation. A re-evaluation must take place at least every three years. It may, however, be conducted more often if the parent or teacher makes a written request. An evaluation may also be done in specific areas of concern. A re-evaluation of all areas of suspected need or one for particular areas may occur if parents feel their child is not meeting the short-term objectives of the current IEP.

Parents who feel their child's placement should be changed need to have a basis for their request. For example, a child may be exhibiting problem behaviors that were not previously exhibited. It may be necessary to reassess his placement or develop new behavior techniques to address this area. As a first step, an evaluation by a specialist familiar with ASD behaviors could be requested. The IEP can then be changed to reflect the results.

For example, a child may have an annual goal to increase her language production and comprehension skills, but is not meeting the objectives developed in her IEP for this goal. The

parent may wish to request that a re-evaluation be done with a speech therapist who has knowledge of autism. It may be determined from the results that an increase in the number of hours of therapy per week is necessary.

A re-evaluation of all areas of suspected need may come prior to the scheduled annual IEP meeting. If the child has made significant progress since the last evaluation, the treatment, placement and therapy recommendations may not be applicable. A re-evaluation addressing all areas would become the basis for a more appropriate IEP.

Parents may suggest that professionals with knowledge of autism be present at the school for these evaluations. The school does not have to use the suggested professional, but may appreciate the assistance in finding a qualified person. As explained above, if the parents disagree with the school's evaluation, they do have a right to acquire an independent evaluation.

The evaluation (school or independent) should become the basis for writing the child's IEP. The IEP must be prepared and agreed upon before placement decisions are made. The placement may not be chosen first, then the IEP written to fit the placement decision.

Just as there are various treatment approaches, there are multiple educational programs that provide stimulating learning environments. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) is a federal mandate that guarantees students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education. The education plan for a student with disabilities can include "related services" that may encompass many of the treatments discussed in the treatments section.

The common thread in autism is the presence of a developmental disability; more specifically, a disorder of communication that manifests itself differently in each person. But whatever the level of impairment, the educational program for an individual with autism should be based on the unique needs of the student. If this is the first attempt by the parents and school system to develop an appropriate curriculum, conducting a comprehensive needs assessment is a good place to start. This evaluation will become the blueprint for your child's educational plan.

Educational planning for students with autism often addresses a wide range of skill development, including academics, communication and language skills, social skills, self-help skills, behavioral issues, and leisure skills. It's important to consult with professionals trained specifically in autism to help your child benefit from his/her school program. But keep in mind, even the most well-intentioned advice may generate inappropriate curriculum models and impair the child's ability to develop to his/her fullest potential. That's why it's important to obtain a wide range of opinions and keep a close eye on your child's progress or lack thereof.

Most professionals agree that individuals with autism respond well to highly structured, specialized education programs designed to meet the individual's needs. Based on the major characteristics associated with autism, there are areas that are important to look at when creating a plan: social skill development, communication, behavior, and sensory integration. Programs sometimes include several treatment components coordinated to assist a person with autism. For example, one individual's program may consist of speech therapy, social skill development and the use of medication, all within a structured behavior program. Another child's may include social skill development, sensory integration and dietary changes. No one program or diet is perfect for every person with autism. It's important to try several approaches and find the ones that work best on an individual basis.

With all of that said, parents and professionals need to work together. Teachers should have some understanding of the child's behavior and communication skills at home, and parents should let teachers know about their expectations as well as which techniques work at home. Open communication between school staff and parents can lead to better evaluation of a student's progress. Community goals like purchasing meals and grocery shopping should be reinforced through work at school, just as parents' goals for their child outside of school, such as the development of leisure activities, should be reinforced. Cooperation between parents and professionals can lead to increased success for the individual with autism.

Academic goals need to be tailored to the individual's intellectual ability and functioning level. Some children may need help understanding social situations and developing appropriate responses. Others may exhibit aggressive or self-injurious behavior, and need assistance managing their behaviors. No one program will meet the needs of all individuals with the disability, so it is important to find the program or programs that best fit your child's needs. Just like treatment approaches, educational programs should be tailored to your child's individual needs, flexible and re-evaluated on a regular basis.

To understand your child's rights in America's public schools, it helps to start with one of the primary laws governing the education of children with disabilities: the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 \(P.L. 108-446\)](#). IDEA is a federal law that guarantees a free and appropriate public education for every child with a disability. This means that if you enroll your child in public school, his/her education should be at no cost to you and should be appropriate for his/her age, ability and developmental level. IDEA is an amended version of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), passed in 1975. In 2004, IDEA was reauthorized (P.L. 108-446), further defining children's rights to educational services and strengthening the role of parents in the educational planning process for their children.

Getting a Copy of IDEA

Copies of the IDEA law and/or regulations are available from the Government Printing Office or may be available at your public library. Your state senator may also be able to provide you with a copy. Or you can visit the Web site of the [Families and Advocates Partnership for Education \(FAPE\)](#) project, run by the PACER Center and funded by the U.S. Department of Education or the [IDEA Partnerships](#) Web site for information on the law and its regulations.

IDEA has both statutes and regulations. The IDEA statute is the governing legislation - the language of the law - and the regulations are an explanation of how the law is to be enacted. The law explains what conditions exist; the regulations explain how these conditions are applied.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act was designed to give all students - including those with disabilities - the opportunity to have an appropriate, high-quality education. It does this by creating a state-by-state accountability system. For students with disabilities, the law requires that their academic progress be measured and reported. As a result, parents of children with disabilities can learn how their children, as a category of students, are achieving compared to their non-disabled peers. While NCLB has many challenges, it has been positive for students with disabilities because children whose progress is measured get taught.

Other Laws

Two other laws governing the educational rights of students with disabilities are the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-380), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, (P.L. 93-112).

In brief, the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) protects the privacy of a student's educational records and outlines inspection and release of information. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act protects the civil rights of persons with disabilities. It prohibits discrimination against a person with a disability by an agency receiving federal funds.

Given the rights your child has to educational services, you must keep in mind that IDEIA establishes the minimum requirements schools must provide. For states to receive federal funds, they must meet the eligibility funding criteria of IDEIA. States may exceed the requirements and provide more services. They cannot, however, provide fewer services or have state regulations or practices that contradict the guidelines of IDEIA.

The federal regulations do not require states to provide an "ideal" educational program or a program the parents may feel is "best." The state must provide an appropriate educational program, one that meets the needs of the individual student.

Placement Options

Parents need to be aware of the educational rights and the placement options available. There is not a "one-size-fits-all" model for the education of children with disabilities. Programs that are called "autism classrooms" or "autism programs" may not provide the services and curricula that are right for your child. Therefore, it is possible that a child with autism may not receive an appropriate education in an "autism class." The range of available placement options allows for the creation of unique educational placements for each child.

Placement options range from total inclusive settings where children with autism receive their education alongside non-disabled peers to private placement in residential programs for children with disabilities. Within that range, a wide variety of plans can be created to meet the unique needs of each student. A parent may wish to look at placement options as they currently exist for other students. By viewing current special education programs and inclusive classrooms, you'll get an idea of how other [Individualized Education Plans \(IEPs\)](#) have been put into practice.

Determining Placement

Determining the most appropriate placement for your child is a two-step process:

1. Determine your child's level of functioning and associated needs by requesting an evaluation or re-evaluation through the school or independent professional(s). This evaluation should include specific recommendations for supports, educational services and levels of treatments.
2. In collaboration with your child's prospective teacher(s), service providers and school administrator; develop a well-defined and thorough IEP. Discuss the options for placement that meet the needs of your child. How does the school currently provide services for children with disabilities? Are there programs currently in place that can be

modified to meet your child's needs? Using this information, you and the school together can determine your child's most appropriate placement.

Least Restrictive Environment

When faced with the challenge of selecting an appropriate placement for a child, parents and professionals need to understand the concept of "least restrictive environment" (LRE). IDEIA sets up procedural guidelines to ensure a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment tailored to each child's individual needs.

The law begins with the assumption that, to the maximum extent possible, children with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers. Once the child's needs are assessed and necessary services and supports are determined, the placement options should begin with the regular or inclusive classroom. Children with disabilities do not have to start in a more restrictive or separate class and then "earn" the right to move to a less restrictive placement. If it is found that a regular education classroom would not meet the child's needs, even with support services, then another option may be pursued. Keep in mind that the child with a disability must benefit from the placement. The child should not be "dumped" in a classroom where he/she is not receiving an appropriate education.

The law specifies that educational placement should be determined individually for each child, based on that child's specific needs, not solely on the diagnosis or category. No one program or amount of services is appropriate for all children with disabilities. A safe educational environment is important for all children. School safety concerns are addressed in IDEIA, and educational services cannot be withheld as a disciplinary remedy. While students with disabilities may be suspended for disciplinary concerns that would also apply to general education students, educational services must continue at all times, even when a student is expelled for behavior not associated with his disability.

Within the law, there are specific procedural safeguards to protect your child's rights. If you and the school disagree on the placement, educational program or other areas surrounding your child's education, you may want to utilize one or more of the following approaches:

- Discussion or conference with school staff. Staff may include the teachers, counselors or principal.
- An IEP review. You may request an IEP review at any time.
- Negotiation or mediation. Mediation is a voluntary process as described in IDEIA in which a neutral third person (mediator) assists parties (parents and the school) to work together to resolve their dispute. All states must have a mediation process that meets the requirements of IDEIA, including maintaining a list of qualified mediators and bearing the cost of the mediation process. Neither party is required to use mediation. The mediator cannot force either party to accept a resolution to the dispute. If a mutually satisfactory agreement is reached on some or all of the issues, a written agreement is set forth. Discussions that occur in mediation are confidential and may not be used as evidence in subsequent proceedings. Mediation must be available as a dispute resolution option, but may not be used to deny or delay the parental right to a due process hearing.
- Due process hearing. You may request a due process hearing if you do not agree with your child's identification, evaluation, or educational placement. This is a legal proceeding, and you should obtain legal advice.

- Complaint resolution procedures. Any individual or organization may file a complaint alleging that the local educational agency has violated a requirement of IDEA. The complaint must be written and signed, and must cite the specific IDEA requirement that was violated and the facts upon which the allegation is made. The state educational agency must resolve the issues of the complaint within 60 calendar days after it is filed.

After the IEP Is Completed

Once the IEP is completed, ongoing communication between school and parents is essential to a child's success. The family and school need to work together for the child to receive maximum benefit. The IEP is a working document that can change. It should represent a program flexible enough to respond to the changing needs and skills of the person with autism. The IEP team can meet to discuss changes or additions to a child's plan at any time. The child's parents or school representatives may request a meeting when either party feels the IEP needs to be adjusted to a child's current needs.

Support Agencies

Many parents seek out assistance from education or disability advocates. To help you better understand your child's rights under federal law and more effectively communicate with professionals regarding your child's education, each state has a federally funded Parent Training Information Center (PTI) that provides information and assistance to parents facing the educational process. PTIs are designed to teach parents basic advocacy techniques and encourage them to become full participants in their child's education. These organizations, which are sometimes administered through other disability organizations such as Easter Seals or the ARC, can help parents gain confidence in advocating for their children's rights.

Every state also has a Protection and Advocacy Agency. Originally, these agencies were set up to protect individuals with disabilities from abuse and neglect; however, their scope is much broader now. In many of the agencies, their advocacy centers around helping families obtain free, appropriate, public education for their children. State Protection and Advocacy Agencies offer training, case management, and legal counsel in many instances.

The [U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs \(OSEP\)](#) is also a resource of information on education rights. If you have a question regarding IDEA and can't get an answer in your state, you may write OSEP for clarification of the law. Contact OSEP directly at the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue SW, Mail Stop 2651, Washington, DC 20202; phone: 202-205-5507.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Source: Autism Society of America

www.autism-society.org

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a written document that outlines a child's education. As the name implies, the educational program should be tailored to the individual student to provide maximum educational benefit. The key word is individual. A program that is appropriate for one child with autism may not be appropriate for another.

The IEP is the cornerstone for the education of a child with a disability. It should identify the services a child needs so that he/she may grow and learn during the school year. It is also a legal document that outlines:

- The child's special education plan by defining goals for the school year
- Services needed to help the child meet those goals
- A method of evaluating the student's progress

The objectives, goals and selected services are not just a collection of ideas on how the school may educate a child; the school district must educate your child in accordance with the IEP.

To develop an IEP, the local education agency officials and others involved in the child's educational program meet to discuss education-related goals. By law, the following people must be invited to attend the IEP meeting:

- One or both of the child's parents
- The child's teacher or prospective teacher
- A representative of the public agency (local education agency), other than the child's teacher, who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education
- The child, if appropriate
- Other individuals at the discretion of the parent or agency (such as a physician, advocate, or neighbor)

With the [2004 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act](#), or IDEA (P.L. 108-446), parents now must be included as "members of any group that makes decisions on the educational placement of the child." IEP meetings must be held at least annually, but may be held more often if needed. Parents may request a review or revision of the IEP at any time. While teachers and school personnel may come prepared for the meeting with an outline of goals and objectives, the IEP is not complete until it has been thoroughly discussed and all parties agree to the written document.

Parents are entitled to participate in the IEP meeting as equal participants with suggestions and opinions regarding their child's education. They may bring a list of suggested goals and objectives as well as additional information that may be pertinent to the IEP meeting.

The local education agency (LEA) must attempt to schedule the IEP meeting at a time and place agreeable to both school staff and parents. School districts must notify parents in a timely manner so that they will have an opportunity to attend. The notification must indicate the purpose of the meeting (i.e., to discuss transition services, behavior problems interfering with learning, academic growth).

Parents may encounter stipulations presented by school personnel that may not necessarily be supported by the provisions of IDEA. Some statements have included:

- IEPs must be a predetermined number of pages.
- IEPs are to be completed without parental input and only a certain number of goals and objectives are allowed in the IEP.
- If your objective doesn't fit into the field length on our computer program, it can't be included.

There is nothing in the federal law that supports these types of statements or stipulations. While parents should not accept misinformation concerning the IEP, you don't need to approach the parent/school relationship in an adversarial manner. It is in everyone's best interest to remember that both parents and teachers share a common goal: to develop a program that will be appropriate for the child with autism. By sharing information and knowledge, parents and schools can collaborate to develop a truly effective IEP.

Learn more about:

- [The IEP Meeting](#)
- [Related Services](#)
- [Teacher/Staff Requirements](#)
- [Goals/Objectives/Evaluation](#)

The IEP Meeting

After an evaluation has been done, the IEP meeting will be scheduled. As noted earlier, you are entitled under law to attend and participate in this meeting, and you must be given ample notification of the time and place. You should also request a copy of the evaluation that was done prior to the meeting so you have time to review it.

[The Families and Advocates Partnership for Education \(FAPE\)](#) suggests considering the following:

- What is your vision for your child - for the future as well as the next school year?
- What are your child's strengths, needs and interests?
- What are your major concerns about his or her education?
- In your child's education thus far, what has and has not worked?
- Does the evaluation fit with what you know about your child?

While the IEP meeting is meant to develop an educational plan for your child, it is also an opportunity for you to share information about your child, your expectations and what techniques have worked at home. If for some reason you do not agree with the proposed IEP, you do have recourse. See the section, ["What If You and the School Don't Agree?"](#)

Content of the IEP

The IEP should address all areas in which a child needs educational assistance. These can include academic and non-academic goals if the services to be provided will result in educational benefit for the child. All areas of projected need, such as social skills (playing with other children, responding to Q&A),

functional skills (dressing, crossing the street), and related services (occupational, speech, or physical therapy), can also be included in the IEP.

The IEP should list the setting in which the services will be provided and the professionals who will provide the service. Content of an IEP must include the following:

- A statement of the child's present level of educational performance. This should include both academic and nonacademic aspects of his/her performance.
- A statement of annual goals that the student may reasonably accomplish in the next 12 months. This statement should also include a series of measurable, intermediate objectives for each goal. This will help both the parents and educators know whether the child is progressing and benefiting from his/her education. The development of specific, well-defined goals and objectives is crucial to your child receiving an appropriate education.
- Appropriate objective criteria, evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, at least annually, whether the child is achieving the short-term objectives set out in the IEP (e.g., "How are we judging whether intervention is successful?" "How long will my child be in this program?").
- A description of all specific special education and related services, including individualized instruction and related supports and services to be provided (e.g., occupational, physical, and speech therapy; transportation; recreation). This includes the extent to which the child will participate in regular educational programs.
- The initiation date and duration of each of the services, as determined above, to be provided (this can include extended school year services). You may include the person who will be responsible for implementing each service.
- If your child is 16 years of age or older, the IEP must include a description of transitional services (coordinated set of activities designed to assist the student in movement from school to post-school activities).

Related Services

It is important that the child receive an appropriate education and therefore benefit from that education. Students with disabilities have a right to related services to help them learn and receive the maximum benefit from their educational programs. Related services, according to IDEIA, consist of "transportation and such developmental, corrective and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education." These services are to be determined on an individualized basis, not by the disability or category of the disability.

If a child needs any of these "related services" to benefit from his/her education, they must be written into the IEP. Frequency and duration of services, as well as relevant objectives, should be included. Related services as defined by IDEIA may include, but are not limited to the following:

- Audiology
- Counseling services
- Early identification and assessment of disabilities in children
- Medical services (for diagnostic or evaluation purposes only)
- Occupational therapy
- Parent counseling and training
- Physical therapy

- Psychological services
- Recreation
- Rehabilitation counseling
- School health services
- Social work services
- Speech pathology
- Transportation

The regulation does not limit related services to those specifically mentioned above. If a child requires a particular service to benefit from special education and that service is developmental, corrective or supportive, it is also a "related" service and should be provided. It does not have to be expressly listed in the regulation. Examples of these kinds of services may include a full- or part-time aide or assistive technology, such as a computer.

Teacher/Staff Requirements

While IEP goals and objectives should be child-centered, the document may also contain information regarding teacher/staff training. If the IEP team decides that additional training is required for a student's teacher, this information must be included in the text of the IEP. For example, the team may decide it would be beneficial for a teacher to take an autism course at a local university. Or it may want the school support staff to attend a two-hour seminar on autism. Personnel standards and teacher certification requirements are established by each state. For more information on the state certification requirements in your area, please contact the appropriate state education agency.

Goals/Objectives/Evaluation

An IEP should include goals and objectives specific to each child's unique needs. Goals may be broad, such as "John will increase his verbal communication and comprehension," or specific, such as "This student will learn to interact more with her peers at recess and lunch." Educational objectives are tailored to a child's individual needs and based on the long-term goal. They describe the process by which the child may reach the goal and how a child's progress will be monitored.

For example:

GOAL: "Krista will increase her verbal responses to questions during the course of the year."

OBJECTIVE: "Krista will increase her verbal responses by receiving speech therapy from a licensed speech pathologist at least four times a week, in a one-on-one situation, in the resource room.

The sessions will last at least 30 minutes. Krista will verbally answer questions with 85 percent accuracy, after receiving both verbal and visual cues. The speech pathologist will send weekly reports, based on record keeping, to Krista's parents as well as her homeroom teacher. This therapy shall begin September 1st and continue until June 3rd, excluding pre-determined school holidays."

The above objective specifically states:

- The service to be provided (speech therapy),
- The professional who will be providing that service (a licensed speech pathologist),
- The setting in which the service will be provided (resource room),
- How often the service will be provided (four times a week), and
- The length of the service (30 minutes/session from September 1st through June 3rd).

The evaluation component of the objective addresses the question "How will we know whether Krista is making progress?" In this case, the speech pathologist will determine whether Krista is meeting the goal of 85 percent accuracy and send reports to her homeroom teacher and family each week. Other evaluation methods include test-taking, videotaping, peer reports, daily logs, checklists, computer printouts, and worksheets.

The above information is only one example of an objective to meet the goal of increasing verbal responses. Goals can have more than one objective. Parents may wish to review with school staff the curriculum and methods used for their child's education. This information can be used as a springboard for discussion among IEP team members.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

If we are visible, active participants in our schools and communities, then our children are more likely to be accepted and viewed as belonging to that community. With such participation, knowledge gained of a child's special interests, of effective strategies for developing social relationships, styles of learning, and nurtured self-esteem can transfer to other areas of a child's life.

Below are some practical strategies that have been used by either myself or other parents in achieving "family integration." Whether it be because of age, disability, situation or choice, some may apply to you and some may not. In any case, it is the understanding of "integration" as a philosophy and practice in everyday living that is important--the rest will follow.

Tips for Parents on Community Integration

- Attend and participate in the school Parent Teacher Organization, activities, fund raisers (if you only help for one hour at one of these, it's appreciated!). Remember that you are as much a member of that school as any other parent there.
- Volunteer at your child's school in an area that they could use some assistance and that you enjoy and have an interest in. This is one way to promote a positive, friendly relationship with the school in a non-threatening situation.
- Volunteer to host a Holiday Party (Christmas, Easter, etc.) for your child's class in school. Most teachers would appreciate the extra hands, supplies, and or ideas.
- Join any organization in town that you personally have an interest in and would enjoy (Women's Guild, Junior Women's Club, YNCA, Community Center, Library Group, etc.)
- Teach religious instruction *if that is your interest), or consider being an aide or leader in the boy/girl scouts, baseball league, etc.
- Go on walks in your neighborhood. You meet neighbors in a natural and friendly setting.
- When doing errands, try to take your child along with you from time to time, just as other parents would. One day that grocer, garden center, retail store...may be a source of employment for your child. The owner is more likely to consider hiring if he/she is familiar with you and your child.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS AND BELONGING IN THE COMMUNITY ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU, TOO!

- Gymnastics. I would not even think of something like this had it not been a passion of my own son's. It was a lesson I learned of never ruling out an activity on the basis of what I think is appropriate, reasonable, and accomplishing. How could a child with CP do gymnastics? What would the instructor say if I asked to enroll him? At my son's insistence I asked and the instructor hesitantly agreed. He amazed and impressed all of us with his persistence and progress. His peers treated him no different than anyone else and my son's self-esteem soared. The level of skill and knowledge does not have to be the same for each child in order for him/her to be accepted by others and accomplish their task.
- Lastly, as your child gets older, look for ways for him or her to "volunteer" in your community. As well as providing opportunities for socializing, it also helps build a resume and acquire marketable job skills.

INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELAXED, SHARED, HAPPY EXPERIENCES = GOOD FEELINGS INSIDE AND OUT, BELONGING, IMPROVED SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE FOR ALL OF US!

For every child it is important to accept that some things work and some don't. Many of us work outside the home and do not always have the time or energy to do all we would like. So you pick and choose, do the best you can, and keep a sense of humor.

Nicki Shusterman, Integration Specialist
Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center,

Made possible with special funding from the Connecticut Developmental Disabilities Council.

We need your support ~ to help us continue to support all children with special needs and their families!

For 30 years, the Federation has helped parents and children to obtain educational, health care, and advocacy resources.

We have helped shape the public policy debates and cooperated with other groups to impact legislation needed to serve children with special needs. We have helped parents to become grassroots leaders, thus spreading our effectiveness into ever wider circles.

And we have helped train professional providers and parents in new and effective methods of supporting children with disabilities and their families.

You can help make the next 30 years even more effective!

For your convenience you can now donate online at www.fcsn.org or call 1-800-331-0688 to support the Federation.

The Federation for Children with Special Needs, Inc. is a 501(c)3 organization.



Federation Locations

The Federation has convenient locations throughout the state to provide information and workshops for families.

Main Office: Boston

617-236-7210

Toll-free in MA: 800-331-0688

Central Massachusetts

Worcester Office

508-798-0531

Western Massachusetts

413-323-0681

Toll-free: 866-323-0681

Current projects at the Federation are supported by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health; the Massachusetts Departments of Education, Public Health, Mental Health, and Mental Retardation; and foundations and private contributions.

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**30 Years of Parents
Helping Parents**



Our Mission:

The Mission of the Federation for Children with Special Needs is to provide information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities, their professional partners, and their communities.

We are committed to listening to and learning from families, and encouraging full participation in community life by all people, especially those with disabilities.

About the Federation

- ❖ We believe differences among people are natural and enriching—disabilities included.
- ❖ We value all children as the hope for the future.
- ❖ We maintain that good public policy requires active citizen participation.
- ❖ We have proven that parents helping parents is a most effective way.

Founded in 1974 as a coalition of 12 disability and parent organizations, today the Federation is an independent advocacy organization committed to quality education, healthcare for all, and protecting the rights of *all* children.

The Federation Today

Parent training and advocacy projects
across the state and nation.

Early Childhood

- Early Intervention Training Center
- National Parent Leadership Development for Interagency Coordinating Councils (ICC)
- Project Play Group
- Project FOCUS—Early Intervention—State Improvement Grant

Education/Special Education

- IDEA Unified Partnership
- Parents Engaged in Education Reform (PEER)
- Parent Information Project—Massachusetts Department of Education.
- Parent for Residential Reform (PFRR)
- Parents' PLACE—Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC)
- Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)
- Project FOCUS—Statewide Improvement Grant 1
- Project FOCUS Academy—Statewide Improvement Grant 2
- Advancing Parent-Professional Leadership in Education (A.P.P.L.E.), a model development research project

Health Care

- Family TIES/Parent-to-Parent
- Family Voices (National)
- Massachusetts Family Voices at the Federation
- MassCARE
- Mass. Family-to-Family Health Care Information and Education Center
- Pathways for Parents served by Department of Social Services (DSS)

Visit www.fcsn.org to
access the Federation's



Family Resource Database

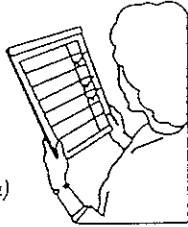
The Family Resource Database contains information about agencies in Massachusetts and throughout the United States which provide information and/or services to families. The FRD contains hundreds of agencies and will continue to grow, so use it whenever you are looking for help.

The Family Resource Database is also available at any of these Federation affiliated websites:

- Early Intervention Training Center (www.eitrainingcenter.org)
- Early Intervention Parent Leadership Project (www.eiplp.org)
- FCSN Spanish Website (www.fcsn.org/espanol)
- Massachusetts Family TIES (www.massfamilyties.org)
- Massachusetts Family Voices (www.massfamilyvoices.org)
- National Parent Leadership Development Project for Interagency Coordinating Councils (www.iccparent.org)
- Parents' PLACE (www.pplace.org)
- Pathways for Parents (www.pathwaysforparents.org)
- Parents for Residential Reform (www.pfrr.org)

A CHECKLIST TO ASSESS SERVICE APPROPRIATENESS

(Developed by the NJ Task Force on Autism)



HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Some of the characteristics listed will be easily observable. Others will require you to ask questions. Once you have made an appointment to visit a potential school placement, you can use this checklist to help formulate questions you would like answered. You may wish to request a pamphlet or brochure describing the program before your visit to help you plan specific questions about the components of the program.

This checklist includes programmatic characteristics which research has shown contribute to the effectiveness of a school or program. As a general rule, the more of these characteristics a school has, the more likely it will be able to meet the needs of a student with autism. It is important to add, however that each child is different and has very specific educational needs. Therefore, some of these characteristics will be more important than others depending on a child's needs.

TEACHING METHODS

- Learning activities are functional and useful for the children.
- Highly-structured, behavioral teaching methods are used.
- A motivational system is used within the classroom.
- There is a thorough and well monitored set of procedures which describe the ways in which inappropriate, self-stimulatory, aggressive and non-compliant behaviors are addressed and treated.
- Medication is used only when prescribed by a child's physician and is carefully monitored.

PROGRESS EVALUATION

- Objective measures which assess the academic and behavioral progress of each child (data), are obtained daily.
- Data, including a baseline period, (pre-treatment), are obtained for all behavior reduction procedures.
- Data are evaluated by staff on a regular basis to assess student progress.
- Progress reports are submitted to parents at least three (3) times a year.
- Daily home/school communication.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND STRUCTURE

- The teachers have instructional control. (The room does not appear hectic.)
- The classroom activities are well organized and seem to run smoothly.
- Staff members are aware of the activities of all the children in the room.
- Classroom and play areas appear to be safe.
- Children are not allowed to wander or engage excessively in inappropriate or self-stimulatory behaviors.
- There is a daily schedule which is being followed.
- Activities are appropriate to the ages and levels of functioning of the children in the classroom.
- There are other children in the classroom who seem similar to your child. (He/She would be among "peers".)

STUDENT/STAFF RATIO

- There is at least one teacher or aide for every three (3) children in the room.
- There are no more than six (6) children in a classroom.
- One-to-one is available if needed.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Staff are monitored and supervised on a regular basis.
- Staff are credentialed for the positions they hold and the functions they serve.
- Parent/teacher conferences are scheduled.

RELATED SERVICES

- One-to-one speech therapy is available for appropriate candidates.
- Group speech therapy is available.
- There is a full-day program for pre-schoolers.
- An extended school year (summer program) is available.
- In-home programming is available if needed.
- A parent training program is available.
- A parent support group is available.
- A sibling support group is available.

YOUR REACTIONS

- The teacher and other staff seemed to be the kind of people you would like to educate your child.
- The program's philosophy regarding the use of medication to manage behavior problems is consistent with your own.
- You were able to ask about and understand the nature of the behavior reduction procedures being used.
- You felt welcome and comfortable.
- You felt good about the program the next day.

PREPLACEMENT INVENTORY

Classroom Staff

How many teachers _____ paraprofessionals _____ other staff _____
work in the room?

How many children are in the classroom?

How many children with disabilities are in the classroom?

Who provides special education support? What kind?

Physical Arrangement

Where is the classroom located in the school?

List places where children sit for group instruction

List places where children sit for individual instruction

Where are the restrooms located?

Where do children eat lunch?

Have recess?

Have gym?

Have Therapies?

Daily Schedule

What are the program hours?

What is a typical week like?

Are there differences day to day?

What specials do children participate in?

Classroom Rules and Routines

Are children required to raise hands? And When?

How should children seek assistance?

Do children line up? When?

How are classroom rules taught?

Self Help

Do children use the bathroom independently?

Teacher Attention

What is the classroom management plan?

What are the classroom rules?

How often do teachers attend to children?

Do teachers use special rewards for good behavior? Which ones?

List methods teachers use as consequences for inappropriate and disruptive behaviors?

Do children play or work in groups where no adults are immediately present?

Parent Involvement

List the types of contact parents usually have with program staff. How often?

Social Skills

How is socialization facilitated?

Communication Form

Date:

People Involved:

Topic of Conversation:

What Needs to be Done:

Results:

Dear _____,

We are the parents of [name of child]. Our child has been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, a neurological disorder that is related to autism. He also has the following comorbid conditions [list] and learning disabilities [list]. While AS affects many aspects of behavior, it shares with autism the “core” deficits in social understanding and language. Simply put, our child sees and experiences the world differently than people who do not have AS. He may seem to “overreact at nothing” or become very emotional “for no reason.” We have learned that in most instances, there is a reason for why our child responds the way that he does. And it is a reason that “makes sense” once you understand AS. We have also learned that there are things we can do to help him. The first and most important is accepting that many of his behaviors are not under his control.

If you have not heard of AS, it is because it is a fairly new diagnosis here in the United States, although it has been recognized elsewhere in the world since the 1940s. People with AS often have a unique and at times unusual mixture of abilities and deficits. They may appear to be more capable than they actually are. AS is a pervasive developmental disorder, and it can affect virtually every facet of a child’s academic, social, and emotional life, sometimes in ways that may be unfamiliar to you. There is no “cure” for AS, but research on the disorder and new interventions and therapies are moving ahead quickly. We will be happy to share with you whatever information that we find that may be helpful to you in helping [name of child] have a positive, productive experience in school. Please feel free to call us anytime at [phone number].

Every child with AS is unique. No two have the same pattern of behaviors, skills, or deficits. A technique or approach that worked for one child may not necessarily work for the next. Or what worked last month may not work today. In the [number] years since our child was diagnosed, he has received the following therapies and interventions: [list]. We found [list the most effective ones] the most helpful. He is currently receiving [list other interventions]. (If relevant), He is taking [name of medication(s)] to address [list the behavior(s), symptoms, disorders, etc.].

Our child’s main strengths are: [list strengths].

The praise he values most is: [list: being told that he is bright, wise, fun to be around].

The most effective rewards would be: [list].

The strongest disincentive would be: [list].

Like many people with AS, our child has special interests: [list special interests]. You may find it helpful to allow him to indulge his special interest by talking about it for a limited period of time as a reward.

AS affects numerous areas. Below is a list of the difficulties [name of child] faces and what we and his other teachers and therapists have discovered works and does not work.

General Personality and Behavior

[name of child] is [list the positives: warm, loving, has a great sense of humor, et cetera].

The areas in which he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make

him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Social Skills with Adults

[name of child] is [list the positives: warm, loving, has a great sense of humor, et cetera].

The areas in which he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges: has difficulties following multistep directions, a tendency to ask for help with things when he does not necessarily need it]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful: breaking all oral directions down into short, simple steps; gently encouraging him to do those things you know he can do]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child: repeating complex instructions several times; forcing him to do things he feels inept at] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior: anxious, dumb]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action: calm and comfort him to regain control].

Social Skills with Peers

[name of child] is [list the positives: interested in other children and anxious to make friends].

The areas in which he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges: his inability to join in appropriately, participate in conversations, and understand how to reciprocate]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful: using Social Stories to cue and remind him of appropriate behavior; setting up situations where he can practice these new skills with other children]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child: simply leaving him in a group of children on the playground to "find his way"] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior: stressed, anxious, and sad]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action: gently remove him from the situation and set up another experience that is "rigged" for success].

Expressive and Receptive Language

[name of child] is [list the positives: has a large vocabulary, tells interesting make-believe stories].

The areas in which he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Auditory Processing

[name of child] is [list the positives: can completely recall songs or poems he has heard only once or twice].

The areas in which he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Sensory Issues

[name of child] is [list the positives].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Fine and Gross Motor Skills

[name of child] is [list the positives: almost at age-level with basic living skills; he can tie his shoes, zip his jacket].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Organizational Skills

[name of child] is [list the positives: able to pack his book bag at the end of the day if prompted; sometimes able to work at his desk without prompting].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Perseverations

[name of child] is [list the positives: engaging in perseverative behaviors less this year than he did last year, and is becoming aware that they are stigmatizing].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Transitions

[name of child] is [list the positives: managing to handle transitions, provided he is given clear, detailed explanations of what is expected].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Changes in Routine, Surprises

[name of child] is [list the positives: still uncomfortable with surprises but less likely to scream when they occur than he was a few months ago].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

Eye Contact

[name of child] is [list the positives: making as much eye contact as he can comfortably right now].

The areas in which is he is most seriously challenged are: [list challenges]. We believe that these can be most effectively addressed by [list interventions and tactics that have proved successful]. Some other approaches such as [list what does not work for your child] do not work for our child and tend to make him feel [describe adverse or undesirable behavior]. When that occurs, we find that it helps to [describe action].

[Any other information you feel is important.]

Sincerely,

[your name]

Preparing the Way

A mother in New Hampshire helped her child be integrated into a regular classroom by writing a letter to the parents of other children in the class. She did this about two weeks after the school year started. It was



timed this way so that her son's classmates could get with her son on their own level first. Then, when those students asked questions of their parents about their classmate, the parents were prepared to answer because the letter had given them information.

The response to her letter was wonderful. Some parents called her directly; others approached her during the school open house. For others who would like to use this idea, the letter is reprinted below.

From left: Richie Messner, Kenny Alstott (seated), Nathan Bourassa, Joey Slater.

New Children's Book

Abby Messner has authored a children's book which deals with the challenge of integrating a special child into a group of other children. Set in a day camp for children where a special boy, John, is creatively drawn into the activities of the other children, the story titled Captain Tommy is "told" by one of the youngsters in the group. This youngster is recruited to play the role of a spaceship captain assigned the task of bringing in a floating spaceship which, of course, represents the predicament of the camper with autism.

Copies of Captain Tommy can be purchased from Potential Unlimited Publishing, the PUP Foundation, P.O. Box 218, Stratham, NH 03885-0218. Phone: (603) 778-6006. Price: \$14.95.

Dear Parents,

My name is Abby Messner and my son, Richie, is your child's classmate this year in Mrs. Henneberry's first grade. I am writing to you today both to introduce myself and to share what I hope will be helpful information -- about Richie.

Richie has a mild form of autism known as pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). PDD is a neurological disorder which affects Richie's communication and play-skills and often prompts people to wonder, "what's wrong with him?" Personally, I like to think there is nothing "wrong" with Richie, just that his needs are different than others. And, while there are many children at Stratham Memorial with special needs, Richie's are somewhat unique in that they are neither immediately apparent, nor is he able to communicate them. Because of Richie's inability to speak to this issue himself, I would like to explain it to you so that you will feel comfortable addressing the issue should your child inquire about Richie.

Richie's physical appearance is just like that of any other first grader (handsome, of course!?!), but because he looks so "normal" physically, one is rather taken aback by his social and educational difficulties. This is particularly difficult for the other children, who may mistake Richie's difficulties for rudeness. To the contrary, Richie loves having other children around him and

longs to have some real friends. This is difficult for Richie, however, because he does not have the language skills to either initiate or maintain friendships.

Richie just recently turned six and, along with being chronologically younger than many of his classmates, some of his mannerisms, behaviors, motor, play and speech and language skills are those of a much younger child. He is able to function at school with the facilitation of an integrator, Mrs. Jean Waldron, who has been with Richie through summer camp and his kindergarten year at Stratham Memorial School. He also receives special education services, along with speech and occupational therapy at school and may not need to leave the classroom for these sessions.

PDD also affects Richie's ability to focus in school. He is hypersensitive to and easily distracted by various stimuli, including certain sounds, the feel of certain clothes or people's touch or art materials (paint, tape). He has difficulty in a room with too many people. A good way to explain his difficulties to your child (should an explanation be necessary and/or appropriate) may be to ask your child to envision a race track and have all the classmates each be a car. Most of the cars cruise along nicely, fully prepared to race, they keep their eyes on the finish line -- stopping only occasionally for fuel. Richie's car, on the other hand, needs frequent "pit-stops" to regroup and refuel. The car is often tempted to go down the wrong track and has difficulty finding

its way back. The car desperately wants to cruise with the rest, but is distracted by the screaming fans, the advertising billboards, the exhaust from the other cars passing him. Richie's "car" does much better during the practice runs, when there are no fans in the bleachers and no other cars -- he is better able to keep his eye on the finish line. This is why Richie often leaves the classroom to work with other teachers -- so that he can "practice" without all the distractions.

I hope that this information helps both you and your child to better understand Richie. As I said above, Richie would love to have some real friends and I would welcome any of his classmates over to play. We have nintendo, a pretty cool fenced-in backyard and bikes to ride! Richie has a little sister named Laura who is 3 and 1/2 years old, in case your child has a sibling who also needs a playmate. Please call me at 772-2980 if you would like to come and visit us sometime!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this and thank you, in advance, for helping your child understand that while Richie may be a little different, inside he is a nice boy who needs friends just like everybody else. I hope you and your family have a wonderful school year.

Sincerely yours,

Abby Messner

SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Greater likelihood of higher quality education.

Consistent with democratic values and practices.

Relevant curriculum and materials.

Effective instructional strategies.

Opportunity to contribute.

Individualization.

Greater expectations.

Improved self-esteem.

Opportunities for friendship.

Improved future possibilities.

Supportive learning environment.

Wider variety of life-enriching opportunities.