

Qualifying for Special Education: Parents Need To Be Informed & Involved

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As an educational consultant, parents often ask me how a child qualifies to receive remedial support and special educational services. The decision of identifying students does have a process and it is the parent who must be well informed to make sure their school is following the rules.

Every school district will agree there is never enough money to provide an appropriate education for each student with a disability. The late President Gerald R. Ford identified the concern of lack of funding in 1975. President Ford, upon signing the Education for All Handicapped Children law, stated 'Unfortunately, the bill contains more than the federal government can deliver... Even the strongest supporters of this measure know that they are falsely raising the expectations of the groups affected by claiming authorization levels which are excessive and unrealistic.' The unrealistic expectations included the promise by Congress to pay forty percent of 'excess cost' within a seven-year time frame to support the requirements of the law that must be fulfilled by the public schools. The alarming reality is the states have received no more than twenty percent of promised funds. The budget for 2007 is \$11.4 billion, which equals eighteen percent of this 'excess' cost. Today, more than 6.7 million students are labeled as having a disability. The category of 'learning disability' is the largest population of the thirteen categories, with 48%. The money to support the special educational mandated programs is frequently covered by local funds. This results in many educational programs, which are not mandated by law, to receive insufficient funding or no funding at all.

The lack of funding to properly support educational programs should make all parents become that more interested and involved in their school districts policies and procedures. The lack of funding for one program always becomes a lack of funding for all other programs, which results in every child being affected and possibly left behind. Finances used to support mandated services may be the reason a school district can not offer enrichment programs, summer academies, expand remedial programs or purchase materials to provide students with an education using the latest technology from teachers who have received the necessary training to be highly qualified.

The lack of funding also means added stress among teachers and administrators. As reported by the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education at the University of Florida, specialist are challenged with "...endless paperwork, large caseloads, lack of support and resources, and threats of legal action. An estimate of 50,000 new special education teachers are needed and the shortage will only get worse as federal requirements to ensure highly qualified teachers go into effect." Perhaps even more alarming is the departure rate of teachers certified in special education-13.5% annually. There is also a growing shortage of "...special education administrators, paraprofessionals, and disability specialist, such as speech/language pathologist." Although lack of qualified staff and necessary funding continues to increase, administrators are still left with ensuring all students are making progress towards the

goals stated in their IEP's (Individualized Educational Plan) and reporting the school's progress using annual assessments to ensure no child is left behind.

What can parents do to help insure their child is properly identified, regardless of whether the school district has the qualified staff and budget to provide the necessary resources? The first step is preschool. Many learning disabilities would not develop to the amount of concern in the elementary years if identified in the early childhood years and received early intervention services. Preschool teachers must receive quality workshops, resources and support, to provide a developmentally appropriate early childhood education for each student. Parents must ask the educational background of their day-care or pre-school provider, types of professional workshops each teacher is required to attend and their policies to provide services with children having special needs. The Yale Child Study Center reported that preschool students are expelled more than three times the rate of K-12 students. Early childhood teachers receiving support from behavioral consultants and educational consultants will come to fruition when parents become more vocal and demand high-quality at all early childhood centers. Although many arguments will arise about financing such programs, the end result must always be remembered. As Gene Maeroff writes in 'Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years', ...'do it right in the first place is the most obvious way to give students what they will need to prosper in the classroom. Otherwise, every intervention afterward becomes remedial- expensive, difficult, bruising to children.'

Remedial is the key word that must be remembered by parents as their child enters elementary school. A child receiving remedial support has displayed an inability to meet the standards at his/her grade level. The first step to help the child master grade level is for the teacher to schedule a meeting with her peers and specialists in the building to collaborate and suggest other educational materials/techniques to teach the content. The school will also have criteria to decide which remedial services will be provided according to classroom test scores and/or observations from specialists. Many schools also use instructional coaches to help the classroom teacher and specialists collaborate their teaching and develop appropriate goals for students. The article 'A Line Item for Achievement' in the American School Board Journal, discusses how instructional coaching is an encouraging and reasonably priced way to improve classroom teaching and student learning. 'The best place to impact teaching and learning is in the classroom....teachers typically apply less than 20 percent of what they learn from traditional training programs, such as conferences and in-services.' A school that provides its staff time to collaborate, displays a respect amongst all its professionals and uses accurate data to develop quality lessons will benefit from instructional coaches and eliminate the 'Wait to Fail' mentality among many school districts.

The concern for special educational services should arise when all remedial services and different teaching techniques implemented by the classroom teacher have been exhausted and limited growth is recorded. A PPT (Planning & Placement Team) meeting should be scheduled. At this meeting, the parents will hear a review of all the implementations made for their child in the classroom and by other remedial specialists. Assessments will be shared to show insufficient growth. An array of tests to be conducted will be explained to the parents. The parent must agree and sign permission forms for these tests to be conducted before any specialist can take the child. After all tests have been conducted, a meeting is scheduled to review the assessments and determine the

child's eligibility for special educational services. If testing shows eligibility for additional special services, the parent can still choose not to give permission for these services to be implemented. However, the parent then fortifies any right to sue the school in the future for not providing their child with a quality education. If a parent disagrees with the test scores, outside testing can be requested or due process may be implemented.

After a child is enrolled to receive special educational services, parents must remain involved to insure their child's individual goals and learning styles are being implemented and displaying progress. Although mainstreaming and inclusion are very politically correct words today, it is important to remember the disability laws and No Child Left Behind Act were implemented to insure every child receives an 'appropriate' education. The implementation of each child's individual educational plan must be reviewed and changed as needed, with the child's learning style and goal for individual success as the main focus.

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