



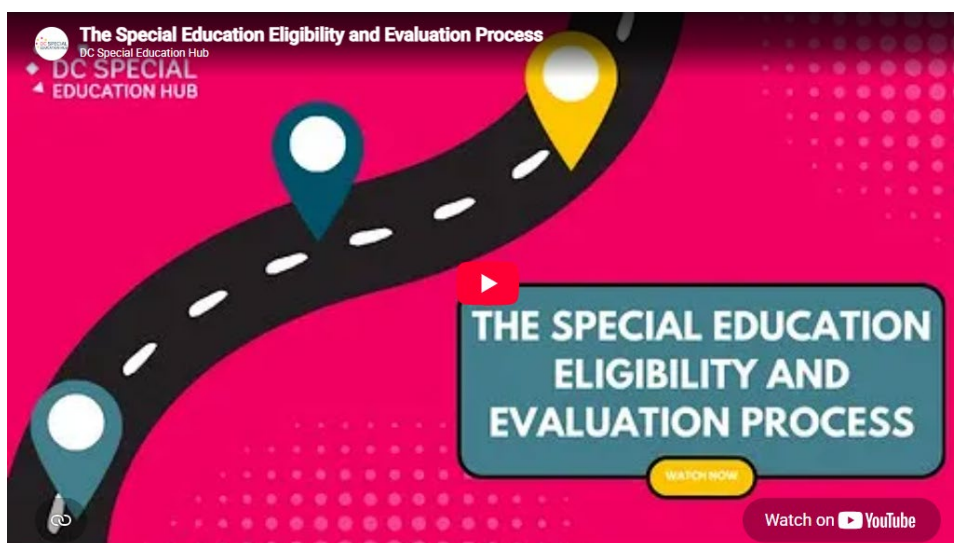
Foundations of Special Education

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Chapter 11: Special Education

Referral and Identification Process

The process of special education referral and identification is just that – a process. It has specific steps and requirements that are legally specified by IDEA. The video below, from the DC Special Education Hub, provides an overview of the main steps that the referral process requires.



Video: DC Special Education Hub. (2023, October 26). *The special education eligibility and evaluation process*.

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8khEZT9QxAl>

Introduction

Every classroom includes students who learn and develop in different ways. While many learning or behavioral challenges can be addressed through effective classroom

instruction, accommodations, and targeted interventions, some students continue to experience significant difficulties despite these supports. For these students, schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to identify whether a disability is present and determine whether special education services are needed. This process is designed to ensure that every child receives the educational supports necessary to make meaningful progress.

The special education referral and identification process is a collaborative effort between the school and the family. Classroom teachers play a particularly important role because they are often the first to recognize when a student is struggling and to implement interventions that may address the problem without the need for special education. When additional evaluation is necessary, schools follow carefully established procedures to ensure that decisions are based on comprehensive, unbiased information and that the rights of both students and families are protected. In this chapter, you will learn how students are referred for special education, how comprehensive evaluations are conducted, the assessment methods commonly used, and the legal safeguards that guide the identification process.

Overview of the Referral Process

In the United States, every [local education agency \(LEA\)](#) must establish procedures for identifying the children in their district who may need special education services. This responsibility is known as [Child Find](#) and includes identifying children with disabilities, evaluating their educational needs, and determining the special education and related services necessary for them to make meaningful educational progress. In most cases, an LEA is a public school district, although some charter schools also function as LEAs. Child Find requires that each LEA make an active effort to locate, identify, and evaluate children with disabilities who may be eligible for special education services. While Child Find requirements were added to IDEA in 2004, each state determines the specific procedures its LEAs use to fulfill these federal requirements ([NASSET, 2024b](#); [Lee, n.d.b](#)).

Child Find emphasizes the early identification of children with disabilities so they can receive appropriate educational supports as soon as possible. Some children are born with

physical, sensory, or health conditions that are known to affect educational performance. For these children, planning for educational supports and services may begin shortly after birth. For many others, however, the need for special education is not identified until after the child begins attending school. When a child's behavior or educational performance does not meet typical classroom expectations or is significantly discrepant from their peers, teachers can first implement classroom accommodations and evidence-based interventions without making a referral for special education. Many schools organize these interventions within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). However, if the student continues to struggle despite these additional supports, a referral for a comprehensive evaluation may be the most appropriate next step ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

The classroom teacher is the most common source of referrals for special education evaluations. A teacher may notice characteristics that suggest the presence of a disability or simply become concerned that a student is not making expected academic, behavioral, or social progress. The student's parents may also have concerns and may make a request for an evaluation. Parents have a legal right to request such an evaluation and schools must respond to this request by either conducting the evaluation or sending written notice explaining why the school team felt that an evaluation was not needed. Although classroom teachers and parents are the most common sources of referrals, requests may also come from other school personnel or outside professionals who suspect the presence of a disability ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Student Support Team

Prior to referring a student for a special education evaluation, the classroom teacher will usually bring the concern to the Student Support Team. Schools use a variety of names for this team, including Child Study Team, Student Assistance Team, and Pre-Referral Team. The work of this team is to assist the teacher in addressing the challenges so that the student can be successful in the classroom and the need to move forward with a special education referral is eliminated. The team investigates the concerns, which could be academic, behavioral, social, or emotional, and identifies the student's strengths and

areas of need. This information can be gathered from an array of sources which include reviewing the student's cumulative file, evaluating classwork and other permanent products the student has completed, and gathering direct observation data. Based on this information, the team then develops a plan to implement educational interventions that will hopefully address the identified challenges so that the student can begin making progress as expected. It is important to note that this process is not placement in special education. The special education teacher may be involved in designing and even implementing the interventions, but this is a general education process designed to address the concern and prevent the need for a special education referral ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

The Student Support Team typically includes the student's classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, the school psychologist, the school counselor, and a school social worker. Depending on the nature of the concern, other professionals such as a speech-language pathologist, reading specialist, occupational therapist, or additional teachers may also participate. Parents are valuable members of the team and should be invited to share information about their child's strengths, needs, and experiences outside of school. Depending on the student's age and the purpose of the meeting, the student may also participate. Even when parents are unable to attend, they should be informed whenever an individual meeting is held to discuss concerns about their child's educational progress ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

At the meeting, the team will review the concerns for this student and how these challenges are interfering with the child's educational progress. The goal is to identify the factors that may be contributing to the student's difficulties and determine which interventions are most likely to improve learning and behavior. The team will also consider the student's strengths and interests, which often provides valuable information for planning the interventions to be implemented. Next the team will set at least one realistic goal for improvement and identify a method for monitoring progress toward that goal. It is important that this goal be written in observable, measurable terms so that student growth can be evaluated. Finally, the team will select one or more evidence-based interventions to implement. It is important to identify who will carry out the intervention, the details of how

the intervention will be implemented, and a timeline for when the team will reconvene to review progress. When the team meets to review the progress data, the members may decide to continue with the intervention, make adjustments to the intervention, try a different intervention, or possibly move to a special education referral ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Parent Consent



Schools must obtain informed consent from parents and give them notice of their rights and the procedural safeguards that are in place.

Image: Gariev, V. (2024, April 24). *A man and woman sitting at a table looking at a laptop*. Unsplash.com (Unsplash free to use)

After the Student Support Team has implemented and monitored appropriate interventions and the data shows that the student has not made sufficient progress, the next step is generally to complete a formal comprehensive evaluation. Before any evaluation can begin, however, the school must obtain written informed consent from the student's parents. Informed consent means that parents receive a clear description of the proposed evaluation, including the assessments that will be administered, the information that will be collected, and the purpose of the evaluation. If records will be shared with or requested from individuals or agencies outside of the school as part of the evaluation process, parents must also provide written permission. To ensure that parents fully understand the proposed evaluation, this information must be provided in the language and mode of

communication they normally use. Parents should also be encouraged to ask questions throughout the process so they fully understand the procedures that will be used and the information that will be collected ([IDEA, 2008](#); [Lee, n.d.a](#); [CPIR, 2021a](#); [NASSET, 2024a](#)).

Parents must also receive notice of their rights and the procedural safeguards that are in place. The burden is on the school to ensure that the parents understand the activities they are giving consent for and are aware that consent is voluntary and may be revoked at any time during the process. It is also important for parents to understand that consent for an initial evaluation does not constitute consent for special education services. If the evaluation determines that a student is eligible for special education, the school must obtain separate parental consent before services can begin. Once written consent for the evaluation has been received, federal regulations generally require that the initial evaluation be completed within 60 days, although some states have established different timelines. If parents do not provide consent, the school may, but is not required to, pursue mediation or due process procedures to seek permission to conduct the evaluation ([IDEA, 2008](#); [Lee, n.d.a](#); [CPIR, 2021a](#); [NASSET, 2024a](#)).

Procedural Safeguards

There are many safeguards in place to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents and give them a system by which they can resolve any disputes. Notice of these procedural safeguards must be provided to families. [The Center for Parent Information and Resources](#) provides this brief summary of these safeguards:

- The right of parents to receive a complete explanation of all the procedural safeguards available under IDEA and the procedures in the state for presenting complaints
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- Confidentiality and the right of parents to inspect and review the educational records of their child

- The right of parents to participate in meetings related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE (a free appropriate public education) to their child
- The right of parents to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE) of their child
- The right of parents to receive “prior written notice” on matters relating to the identification, evaluation, or placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE to their child
- The right of parents to give or deny their consent before the school may take certain action with respect to their child
- The right of parents to disagree with decisions made by the school system on those issues
- The right of parents and schools to use IDEA’s mechanisms for resolving disputes, including the right to appeal determinations ([CPIR, 2021b](#); [IDEA, 2019](#)).

Comprehensive Evaluation

The determination of whether the student has a disability and is eligible for special education must be made by a multidisciplinary team. IDEA guidelines specify that “multidisciplinary” means that this team must have members from at least two different disciplines or professions. One team member typically also serves as the coordinator for the evaluation process. In addition, IDEA requires that parents be members of the multidisciplinary team. Under IDEA, the term parent includes a biological parent, adoptive parent, foster parent, legal guardian, or another individual who fulfills the role of parent for the student. Parents provide valuable information about the student's developmental history, strengths, experiences, and cultural background, making them essential partners in the evaluation process. One purpose of the multidisciplinary team is to ensure that there will be a team approach to the evaluation ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Different states have different regulations establishing which other professionals must be on this team, but the makeup of the team is always determined by the needs of the student. The general education teacher can provide information on the student’s current

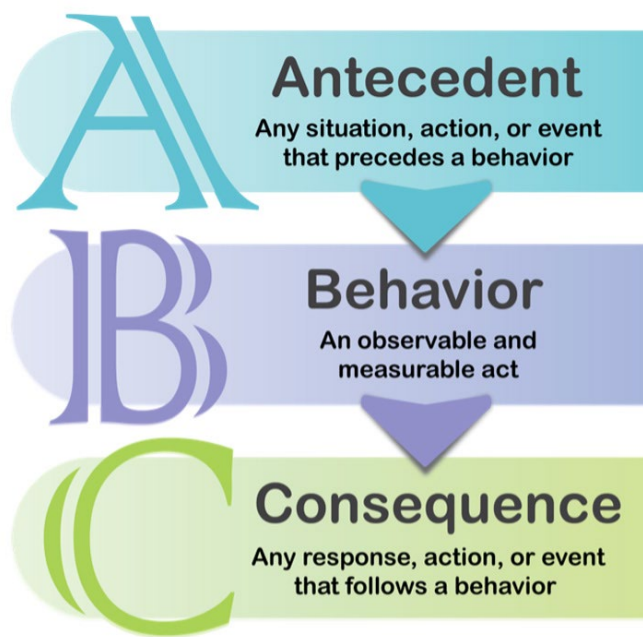
educational progress and the results of any pre-referral interventions that were implemented. The school social worker can work with the student and the parents to complete a social history of the student's past experiences. The special education teacher and school psychologist often work together to conduct various assessments of academic and cognitive ability. A school nurse may be needed to review medical records or consult with the student's medical providers. Physical and occupational therapists can conduct evaluations of motor functioning. A speech and language pathologist is often included to conduct assessments of receptive and expressive language. If behavior is a concern, a behavior specialist may be included to conduct a functional behavioral assessment. An audiologist can assess the student's hearing and advise on hearing aids and other equipment to support learning for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Visual acuity may also need to be assessed. Each member contributes unique expertise that helps ensure the evaluation is comprehensive and meaningful ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

To ensure that evaluation results are accurate and equitable, all assessment materials and procedures used in the evaluation must not be racially or culturally discriminatory and must be administered by professionals with the appropriate training. Evaluations must also be conducted in the child's native language when the child has limited English proficiency. It is important that the assessments used have good validity and reliability. **Validity** is an indication of how well the test actually measures the skills and characteristics it is supposed to measure. **Reliability** is a measure of the consistency of the results. If a test has high reliability, scores should remain stable across time and administrators. When assessment tools demonstrate strong reliability and validity, educators can have greater confidence in the accuracy of the results ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

It is also important to remember that a determination of disability cannot be based solely on the results of one measure. Rather, eligibility decisions are based on the pattern of evidence gathered across the entire evaluation. For this reason, the evaluation process will include a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant information across all areas of suspected disability. A comprehensive evaluation typically includes assessments of cognitive ability, academic achievement, communication, behavior,

social-emotional functioning, developmental history, physical health, and any other areas related to the student's suspected disability ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Assessment Methods



Antecedent->Behavior->Consequence is a useful model for structuring observations of students.

Image: IRIS Center. (2023, November). *ABC model*. Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Assessment in special education is primarily a problem-solving process because information is gathered to make educational decisions about a student's strengths, needs, eligibility, and educational programming. Since comprehensive evaluations involve many aspects of a student's development, professionals from several disciplines may participate in the assessment process. A variety of assessment methods may be used, including observations, interviews, reviews of student work and other permanent products, curriculum-based measures, norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests, and other formal and informal assessments ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Observation is an important component of many special education evaluations because it provides information about how a student functions in typical learning environments. Observations can provide valuable information about academic performance, communication, behavior, social interactions, motor skills, and self-management.

Observations may be structured in a variety of ways, although anecdotal recording is a common place to begin. With anecdotal recording, the observer simply records an objective description of what is observed. This observation record could simply be a narrative of what was observed; however, one useful method for organizing this type of observation is with an A-B-C record. In an [ABC observational record](#), the observer first describes the behavior (B), then records the antecedent (A), or what occurred immediately before the behavior, and finally records the consequence (C), or what happened immediately afterward. In this context, consequence does not necessarily refer to a punishment or negative outcome; rather, it refers to any event that immediately follows the behavior. This process is repeated for each incident that occurs during the observation period, allowing evaluators to identify patterns and better understand the factors that may be influencing the student's behavior ([NASET, 2024a](#); [VanTol, 2026](#)).

Sometimes evaluators are interested in observing only specific behaviors rather than recording everything that occurs. In these cases, the target behaviors must first be defined clearly so they can be identified consistently. For example, if the evaluator is documenting tantrum behavior, which behaviors should be included? Does a tantrum consist only of hitting and kicking, or does it also include throwing objects, yelling, or crying? Information gathered during an earlier anecdotal observation can help with development of precise definitions. Once the behaviors have been defined, how the behavior will be measured depends on the characteristics of the behavior. For example, the evaluator may record only how often each behavior occurs (frequency) or they may also be interested in how long the student engages in the behavior (duration). Target behaviors for assessment may include appropriate behaviors, such as time spent engaged in a learning task, or challenging behaviors, such as the number of times a student interrupts the teacher during a lesson ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

One advantage of observational assessment is that it allows evaluators to see students engaging in spontaneous behavior within their typical learning environments. When observation assessment is conducted across multiple settings, the process is referred to as an ecological assessment. Observing behavior in different environments helps

evaluators identify how environmental factors may influence a student's learning and behavior. One limitation of observational assessment is that evaluators have little control over events occurring during the observation, including the behavior of peers and other environmental variables. Another concern is that observation bias can creep in and contribute to misleading or inaccurate data. Observational bias occurs when an evaluator's own experiences, expectations, or cultural background influence the interpretation of what is observed. This is particularly likely to occur during evaluations of students whose cultural or linguistic backgrounds that differ from those of the evaluator or differ from that of the majority culture. For this reason, evaluators must understand the student's cultural and linguistic background and strive to collect and interpret data as objectively as possible ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Comprehensive evaluations also typically include **interviews** with parents, the student, teachers, and any others who can provide information about the student's history, development, and educational background. An interview is essentially “a conversation with a purpose.” While observations provide information about what a student does, interviews help evaluators understand who the student is from the perspectives of those who know that student best. Most interviews include both structured and unstructured questions. Structured questions are prepared in advance and are designed to gather information related to the student's educational performance and suspected disability. Unstructured questions arise naturally during the conversation and allow the interviewer to follow up on information shared by the interviewee. Interviews may be conducted in person, by telephone, or through video conferencing. The advantage of an interview is that it is personal, and a skilled interviewer can be flexible in which questions are asked and how the interview is conducted. Skilled interviewers can adapt questions, clarify responses, and build rapport with participants, often leading to richer information than can be obtained through written questionnaires. However, interviews can be time-consuming. Language barriers between the interviewer and the person being interviewed can also have a negative impact on the value of the interview ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

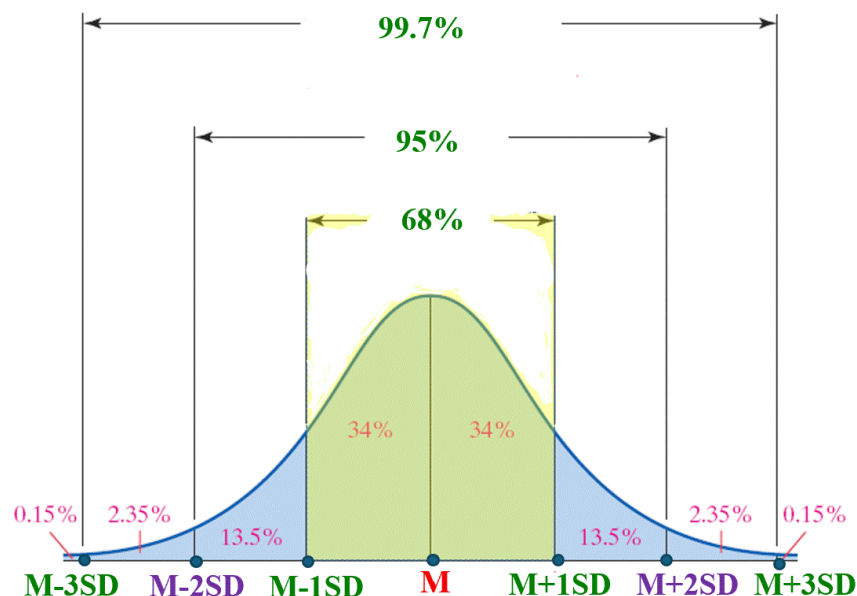
A **review of the student's classroom work** is another important component of a comprehensive evaluation. This process is known as a permanent product review. The evaluator works with the classroom teacher to gather work samples that illustrate the student's strengths, challenges, and progress over time. If the teacher has implemented a portfolio system of assessment, the assessor can conduct a portfolio review. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that demonstrates progress and achievement in different academic areas. Classroom teachers generally use one of three different types of portfolio systems. A working portfolio contains both work in progress and final polished pieces. Alternatively, teachers may only keep a record portfolio which has tests and work selected by the teacher as a record of progress. Showcase portfolios only contain the student's best work and may be less valuable to the assessment process than the other two types. Evaluators analyze these work samples to identify both strengths and areas of need ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

A comprehensive assessment is also likely to include some type of **formal testing**. There are a variety of standardized tests available for this purpose. A test is standardized when the test materials and procedures for administering and scoring the test and interpreting the results are the same for all the children who take the test. Norm-referenced tests are a frequently used type of standardized test. These tests are used to compare a student's performance on various educational tasks to the performance of other students of the same age or grade. The comparison scores, or norms, are developed by administering the test to a large, representative sample of students. Criterion-referenced tests are also standardized, but the student's performance is compared to a particular criterion or standard rather than to the performance of other students. These tests help the examiner determine if the student has mastered specific, clearly defined skills ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Two commonly used approaches for monitoring student learning are curriculum-based assessments (CBAs) and curriculum-based measures (CBMs). **Curriculum-based assessments** evaluate a student's progress within the curriculum currently being taught. These assessments are often developed by classroom teachers and are closely aligned with classroom instruction, but may not be standardized or formally evaluated for reliability

and validity. [Curriculum-based measures](#), in contrast, are standardized assessments that sample important academic skills and are designed to monitor progress toward long-term educational outcomes. CBMs use standardized administration and scoring procedures and often include multiple equivalent forms, allowing them to be administered regularly to monitor student growth over time. They enable educators to compare a student's performance with expected levels of achievement for students of the same age or grade. Comparisons can also be made among students within the same classroom, across classrooms within a school, and among schools within a district. As a result, CBMs can be used not only to monitor individual student progress but also to evaluate the effectiveness of classroom instruction. High-quality curriculum-based measures should demonstrate strong reliability and validity and be aligned with state academic standards. Because curriculum-based measures can be administered repeatedly throughout the school year, they are commonly used for progress monitoring within multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and response to intervention (RTI) frameworks. ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Scoring Terminology



In a normal (bell-shaped) distribution, approximately 68% of the data is within one standard deviation of the mean and 95% of the data is within 2 standard deviations of the mean. In this chart, M=Mean and SD=Standard Deviation.

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The assessment process has its own unique set of terminology and procedures. Many standardized tests are designed for students across a wide range of ages or grade levels. As a result, an individual student completes only a portion of the assessment. Basals and ceilings allow evaluators to administer only the items that are appropriate for the student's ability level, saving time and reducing frustration. A **basal** is established when the student correctly answers a specified number of consecutive items, indicating that the assessor can assume that any easier test items would also have been answered correctly. If the student does not establish a basal at the recommended starting point for their age or grade, the evaluator administers progressively easier items until the basal criterion is met. A **ceiling** is established when the student makes enough errors to indicate that more difficult items would likely also be answered incorrectly, and testing is discontinued (NASET, 2024a).

The **raw score** is the total number of items that the student has gotten correct including all the items below the basal that the evaluator “assumes” the student would have gotten correct. By itself, the raw score provides little information until it is converted into a meaningful score. To give these scores meaning, raw scores can be transformed to fit the normal bell curve and turned into a **standard score**. Standard scores typically have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. This means that about 68% of students will score between 85 and 115, or within one standard deviation of the mean. Approximately 95% will score between 70 and 130, or within two standard deviations of the mean. An IQ score below 70 is one characteristic of intellectual disability. Typically, only 2.5% of the population will have an IQ score below 70. Similarly, many gifted and talented education programs identify an IQ score of approximately 130 or above as one criterion for identification for these programs, as only 2.5% of the population meets this requirement. **Scaled scores** are similar and created in the same way only scaled scores generally have a mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 3 (NASET, 2024a).

Percentile ranks are commonly reported on standardized tests and should not be confused with percentages. Percentile rank indicates the percent of test takers who are the

same age or grade and achieved the same score or lower than this student. For example, a percentile rank of 50 does not mean that a student answered 50% of the questions correctly. Instead, it means the student's score was equal to or higher than the scores of 50% of students of the same age or grade in the norm group. This puts the child exactly in the center of average, which is much better than getting 50% on a test. Percentile ranks range from the 1st to the 99th percentile. A student at the 99th percentile scored as well as or better than 99% of students in the comparison group. Percentile ranks are important because they measure a child's achievement in comparison to the norm for the test ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

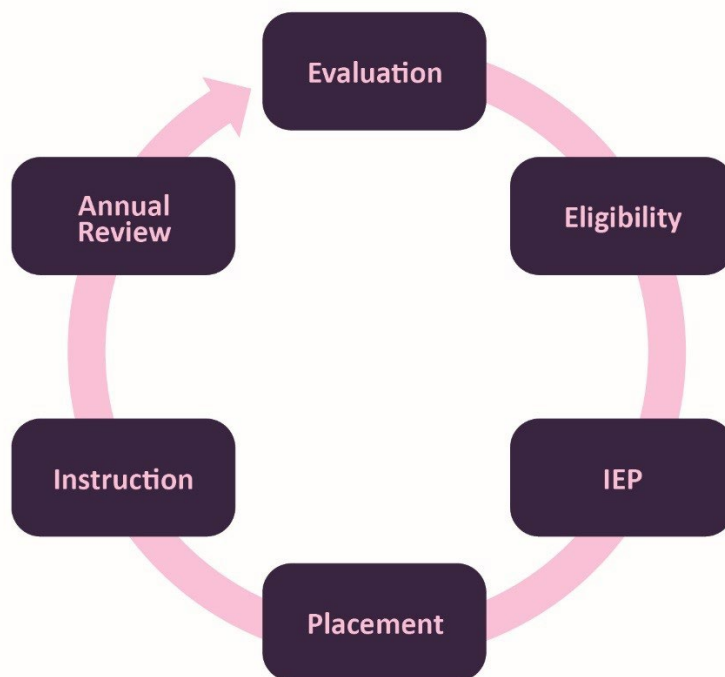
Age-equivalent and grade-equivalent scores are another way of comparing student performance. An [age-equivalent score](#) of 9-4 indicates that the student's performance is similar to that of the average child who is 9 years and 4 months old. Likewise, a [grade-equivalent score](#) of 6.3 indicates performance comparable to that of the average student in the third month of sixth grade. It is important to remember that age-equivalent and grade-equivalent scores do not indicate that a student should be placed in that grade or is performing equally well across all academic areas. They simply describe how the student's score compares with the average performance of students at a particular age or grade level ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Eligibility

If the multidisciplinary team determines that a student has a disability and is eligible for special education, the next step is to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This step will be done by the IEP team. The membership of the IEP team is determined by IDEA requirements and the student's individual needs. Once the parents have given consent for the student to receive special education services, the IEP team has 30 days to put together the IEP. If a student is found eligible for special education, but the parent refuses to give consent for special education services, districts cannot use due process as a means to circumvent lack of parent consent. In this situation, the school is prohibited from providing special education services to the student, although the student may

continue to receive the supports that are available to all students in general education ([NASET, 2024a](#)).

Conclusion



The special education process includes evaluation, eligibility, IEP, placement, instruction, annual review, and evaluation again.

Image from *Child Developmental Psychology* on LibreTexts. (CC BY)

The special education referral and identification process is designed to ensure that students with disabilities are accurately identified and receive the services they need to be successful in school. For classroom teachers, understanding this process is an important part of supporting all learners. Teachers are often the first to recognize when a student may need additional support, and they play a key role in gathering information, implementing interventions, and collaborating with families and other professionals to determine the most appropriate next steps. Throughout the process, families are essential partners, and legal safeguards help protect the rights of both students and parents. By making decisions based on comprehensive, objective, and culturally responsive evaluations rather than on

assumptions or a single assessment, educators can help ensure that students receive the individualized supports and services they need to make meaningful educational progress.

Notice and Reflect

Spend time observing in a classroom or school setting. Identify one student who appears to be experiencing academic, behavioral, communication, or social challenges. Rather than focusing on whether the student might qualify for special education, pay attention to the characteristics of the student and the supports that are already being provided.

Reflect

- What strengths does the student demonstrate?
- What challenges do you observe?
- What instructional, behavioral, or environmental supports does the teacher provide?
- How does the teacher monitor the student's progress or adjust instruction?
- What evidence do you see of collaboration among the classroom teacher, specialists, paraprofessionals, or the student's family?
- Based on your observations, what additional information would be needed before deciding whether a special education referral would be appropriate?

Glossary

- **Age-equivalent score.** Describes how the student's score compares with the average performance of students at a particular age.
- **ABC (Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence) observation framework.** A structured observation tool used to identify patterns of behavior by recording the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequence.
- **Basal.** The starting point on an assessment where a student correctly answers a certain number of questions correctly. The assessor can assume that any easier test items would also have been answered correctly.

- **Ceiling.** The point at which an assessment is discontinued because a student makes enough errors to indicate that more difficult items would likely also be answered incorrectly.
- **Child Find.** Provision in IDEA that requires LEAs to identify children in their district who may need special education services.
- **Curriculum-based assessments (CBAs).** Evaluate a student's progress within the curriculum currently being taught.
- **Curriculum-based measures (CBMs).** Standardized assessments that sample important academic skills. They are designed to monitor progress toward long-term educational outcomes.
- **Grade-equivalent score.** Describe how the student's score compares with the average performance of students at a particular grade level.
- **Local education agency (LEA).** A public authority within a state that maintains administrative control of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, or school district.
- **Percentile rank.** Indicates the percent of test takers who are the same age or grade and achieved the same score or lower than this student on a standardized assessment.
- **Raw score.** The total number of items that a student answered correctly on an assessment. The raw score includes all the items below the basal.
- **Scaled score.** Similar to a standard score with a mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 3.
- **Standard score.** Allows comparison of raw scores by fitting them into a normal bell curve with the same mean and standard deviation.
- **Reliability.** Measures the consistency of the results of a test.
- **Validity.** Indicates how well a test actually measures the skills and characteristics it is supposed to measure.

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