



Pennsylvania Special Education Funding Commission of 2013



The Nuts and Bolts of Special Education: How It Works for Students and Schools

QUESTIONS

General Introductory Questions

- What are the benefits of special education for children? How does special education impact their lives, their ability to learn, and their future opportunities to participate in society?
- What is the general percentage of children with disabilities who have relatively low or moderate needs, compared to the number of children with disabilities who require very, very extensive services? I am really asking about the stereotype of special education students that they are ALL exceedingly different from children without disabilities. Is there any truth to this stereotype?
- When special education works well, how does it benefit teachers and other students in the school who do not have disabilities?
- As science has progressed in recent years to improve the identification and treatment of disabilities, how has this affected the ability of schools to serve children and provide effective special education services? Are there more eligible children? Is it more complex?

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

- Does Pennsylvania's state law on special education follow the federal requirements of IDEA? Are there differences? Also, does the state law narrow or expand the federal rules?
- How do the special education laws apply to charter and cyber charter schools? To private and religious schools?

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

- Does providing an "appropriate" education as required by FAPE mean that children get everything their parents ask for? In other words, does the law require a Cadillac, a Yugo, or something in between?
- Who ultimately decides what is "appropriate" to meet a child's needs as part of FAPE?
- If the FAPE standard is defined to be whether a child is making "meaningful progress", doesn't this seem like a relatively low standard? Does this mean that a child can receive an "appropriate" education even if the school district cannot afford to do everything needed to help the child do better than make "meaningful" progress?

Special Education

- The definition of "special education" seems to emphasize the individualized nature of the educational process for children with disabilities. Just how individualized does it get? Can you paint us a picture of what this really means on a daily and an annual basis?
- How many children eligible for special education actually stay in school beyond the age of 18 and up to the maximum length of time until the age of 21? How does this extra time in public school benefit their ability to live as adults in society?

Local Education Agency (LEA) Responsibility

- One of the responsibilities of school districts is to identify children to determine whether they have a disability and need special education services to succeed in school. How does the formal identification process actually work? How is it handled? How do parents respond when the school itself initiates this process?
- I understand that, in general, a greater percentage of children in foster care, group homes, and other placements may have a disability and need special education, especially for emotional or behavioral issues. Is this your experience? What is the responsibility and the burden placed on school districts for providing special education services to children living in the facilities located in their community? I would imagine that some of these children have significant needs.

Evaluations for Special Education

- Walk us through the steps involved in doing a formal evaluation of a child for special education. How thorough is the process? How does it work? Who does the testing? And is this process any different when it must be repeated at least every three years for children eligible for special education?
- How do schools perform special education evaluations for children who recently moved to this country and do not speak English well or for other children who are not able to communicate due to their disability? What kind of different situations do schools face with these evaluation complexities?

Eligibility for Special Education

- There are 13 different disability categories of special education. What is the range of student needs within each category? In other words, how broad is the range of services needed for different children within each category, such as autism? How does this variety affect the responsibilities of each school to provide appropriate special education services?
- Can you explain the differences between the three separate special education categories for autism, intellectual disabilities, and traumatic brain injury?
- How does special education help children who are eligible in the category of “emotional disturbance”? What are the different needs of and services for these children?
- I understand that the largest special education categories – the ones with the most children – are generally for specific learning disabilities and speech-language impairment. What is the range of needs and services for these children? How do schools help them?
- What constitutes the special education category for “multiple disabilities”? What does this mean? What is the range of services needed by these children?

Service Options for Students with Disabilities Not Eligible for Special Education

- Is it possible for a child to have a disability but not need special education? How often does that occur? What can a school do to offer help to such children, short of providing special education?
- What kinds of accommodations and services do children receive under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or under the Americans with Disabilities Act, when they are not eligible for special education? How do those other programs work?
- Does federal or state funding appropriated for special education also pay for services required for children with disabilities who are not eligible for special education but who are eligible for accommodations and services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or under the Americans with Disabilities Act? Where does the funding come from for services to these students, if not from the funding appropriated for special education?

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

- What is the importance of the written plan, the IEP, for each child? How is it created and how is it used? How many people are involved?
- What is the most challenging part of developing an IEP for most children? What is the most challenging part of implementing an IEP for most children?
- Can you give an example of the level of detail needed in a good IEP so that the plan truly helps the child and the child's teachers?
- What happens if the school lists a service for a child in the IEP and then – for whatever reason – does not actually provide the service? Are services included in the IEP for a child optional or mandatory?

IEP Team

- Who is part of a typical IEP Team? What roles do they serve?
- What is the benefit of having classroom teachers serve on the IEP Team?
- How often does the IEP Team meet for each child? What happens during a typical meeting?
- What are the most useful functions of the IEP Team and the meetings of the Team? What are the biggest challenges for this process?

Least Restrictive Environment

- Who decides where the child should receive special education services? And how is it determined that the placement is in the “least restrictive environment”?
- What are the benefits for children with disabilities from receiving their education in the least restrictive environment, compared to less inclusive placements? Similarly, when inclusion works well, how does it benefit other children who do not have disabilities?
- What is the percentage of children with disabilities who are just not able to receive most of their education in regular classrooms with their peers who do not have disabilities? Why do these children need to receive most of their education in other settings?
- What is the range of different options for including a child with disabilities in educational settings and other school activities with their peers who do not have disabilities? Is there a benefit to including them for things that occur outside of the regular classroom, such as lunch or recess?
- What are the kinds of accommodations, supports, and services that help children to be included in the least restrictive environment? How does it actually work so the child with the disability can thrive and also so the regular classroom can function smoothly for the other students?

Progress in the General Education Curriculum

- Do I correctly understand that the law presumes children with disabilities should be taught according to the general education curriculum – the same general curriculum as other students? How does this work in the classroom? Is the curriculum modified for some students?
- Are most students with disabilities able to make progress and truly be involved in the general education curriculum? What supports and services do they need to accomplish this objective?

Support Options for Students Eligible for Special Education

- Can you paint us a picture of the variety of special education supports for students – learning supports, emotional supports, and life skills?
- What are the main service differences between “itinerant support”, “supplemental support” and “full-time support”? In other words, how do these services operate differently?
- Can you give us some concrete examples of the following kinds of supports and services and also how students benefit from these services?

Curriculum adaptation	Assistive technology
Therapies (speech, physical, occupational)	Transportation
School health services	Behavior counseling
	Training and assistance for teachers
- How does it work in practice for students with disabilities to receive specialized therapies and other services when they are learning in regular classrooms?
- Can you describe the roles played by the various professionals needed to provide special education services, such as psychologists, behavioral specialists, assistive technology specialists, physical and occupational therapists, literacy specialists, classroom aids, paraprofessionals, and others? How do school districts attract these professionals to work for the district, given the competitive labor market?

Program Modifications and Specially Designed Instruction

- What does it mean for supports and services to be “specially designed” and “based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable”, as required by special education law?

Extended School Year (ESY) Services

- How do extended school year programs work? How does ESY benefit students with disabilities?

Transition Planning

- How does transition planning work for students age 14 and older? How does the transition process benefit students with disabilities?
- How do the services available to adults with disabilities compare to the special education services that individuals received while they were in school?

Written Notices and Dispute Resolution Processes

- Can you explain the basics of the various administrative processes that exist to help schools and parents resolve disputes?
 - IEP team meetings
 - Complaints to PDE’s Bureau of Special Education
 - Mediation services through the PA Office for Dispute Resolution (ODR)
 - Due process/special education hearings (also offered through ODR).

Early Intervention

- Can you describe the Early Intervention programs and services available for children with disabilities or developmental delays from birth to age three and then from age three through their entry to kindergarten or first grade? Who provides these services?