

HANDOUT: IDEA & Appropriate Evaluation

The second principle of IDEA is "appropriate evaluation." The foundation of this principle has been the law's longstanding commitment to use evaluation procedures that ensure all children with disabilities are appropriately assessed for purposes of eligibility determination, educational programming, and individual performance monitoring. The legislation has always had a commitment as well to ensuring that testing and evaluation materials are selected and administered so as not to be racially or culturally discriminatory.

IDEA 1997 maintains these commitments and adds a new dimension to the principle of appropriate evaluation:

One of the most significant changes in IDEA 1997 relates to how the evaluation process should be viewed. "The committee believes that a child should not be subjected to unnecessary tests and assessments... and the local education agency (LEA) should not be saddled unnecessarily with associated expenses." (Committee on Labor and Human Resources, p. 19).

Evaluation activities should include gathering information related to enabling the child to be involved and progress in the general curriculum or, for preschool children, to participate in appropriate activities.

In this way, IDEA 1997 builds on the long-established foundation of sound evaluation practice, eliminating evaluation activities that are unnecessary and costly and moving evaluation in the direction of providing information that is useful in the education and instruction of the child.

If a school is to provide an appropriate education to a child with a disability, it must know what would be "appropriate.". The only way to find that out is to evaluate the child and see what, exactly, is the nature and extent of his or her educational needs. Does the child have a particular category of disability and, if so, does that disability affect the student's educational performance? Because of the disability, does the child need special education and related services? This information is used in several important ways: for example, to determine the child's eligibility for special education and related services and to inform decision making about what is an appropriate education for that child.

Yet many abuses can occur when evaluation is not conducted properly or when results are misinterpreted. Among these are

- Identifying children as having a disability when they don't, or the reverse—thinking they don't have a disability when they do;
- Mislabeling children or misdiagnosing the nature of their difficulty;

- Planning and delivering services based upon inaccurate or incomplete evaluation data—services that may then be inappropriate for the child.
- To prevent such mistakes from occurring, the law has specific requirements about how an evaluation is to be done. For example, Evaluators must be knowledgeable and trained in the use of the tests and other evaluation materials they administer.
- A variety of instruments and procedures must be used to gather relevant, functional, and developmental information about the student.
- Tests and other procedures must be selected and administered so as not to be racially or culturally discriminatory.

The latter is an area of particular concern within the law and the special education field: that students, because of their race or culture, might be inappropriately identified as having a disability, or that the nature of their disability is not adequately understood, because they are evaluated using tests that are discriminatory.

Collecting wrong information about a student can have substantial consequences. The law is firm on the subject of evaluation: It must be appropriately conducted and interpreted, and it must provide relevant information that directly assists persons in determining the educational needs of the child.

Adapted from www.nichcy.org, the website of the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities