

Public Schools and Special Education (9/2011)

The school system is not able to provide assessment services to "diagnosis" medical conditions such as Dyslexia, AD/HD, Autism, etc. School psychologists do provide psycho-educational evaluations to help assist in determination of eligibility for Exceptional Student Education (ESE) programs, such as "Specific Learning Disability" that may be able to provide support services for a student such as you describe.

In response to changes in federal law, the procedures for establishing as child's eligibility for Exceptional Student Education (ESE) support services has undergone significant change. While in the past the results of psycho-educational testing were a major determiner of eligibility, this is no longer the case. Rather, for children who are struggling academically, it is required that lengthy Response to Intervention (Rtl) activities be implemented within the regular education program in an attempt to first remediate skill deficits outside of the ESE setting. This typically involves provision of a structured progression of intervention activities provided in addition to the typical classroom curriculum over a period of months, with careful data collection being done to assess effectiveness.

If, after a variety of such activities are provided, a child continues to demonstrate significant academic deficits in relation to his/her grade-level peers within the school environment, consideration may be given to establishing ESE eligibility and formulating an Individual Education Plan (IEP). At that point, psycho-educational assessment results are considered for validation of the existence of underlying difficulties but are not the primary determinant for program eligibility. For many students, this process can involve the better part of an academic year.

A family may request of the school's Educational Planning Team that a psycho-educational evaluation be performed prior to the completion of Rtl, but there can be no determination of eligibility for ESE support services until that portion of the process is complete. What can occur, in some cases, is the ability to provide a student with a Section 504 Plan that can provide academic and testing accommodations within the regular education setting based on the psycho-educational evaluation by itself. Such accommodations can be continued into college based on an evaluation that is at least three years current. If at some later point the student is found eligible for an ESE program, the 504 Plan is dismissed and the accommodations it provided are included as a part of the IEP, instead.

While a family is always able to seek private evaluation, diagnosis by another source of "Dyslexia" or "AD/HD" or an autism spectrum disorder does not, in and of itself ensure any sort of eligibility for school-based ESE services. The Rtl process must still be put into effect for any of these diagnoses to determine the educational impact of the disorder and the ability for it to be successfully remediated within a regular education setting prior to any consideration of eligibility for ESE services.

The process I have described above is much different than that in effect within the public school system for many years, with professionals in the community often not being aware of the changes that have taken place. In essence, there has been a major shift toward remediation of academic difficulty outside of ESE services. The fact that a student is not performing well in regular classes is, in and of itself, not sufficient to "prove" that this has not been successful. Rather an intense, data based intervention process is now required. It does not matter if the student has a medical/psychological diagnosis in their records that would suggest an impact on learning...the actual impact and its response to systematic intervention must first be evaluated within the school environment for a period of time before movement toward determining eligibility for ESE support services is allowed.