COMPREHENSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATION

Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

Overview

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that special education evaluations be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the student's disability-related educational needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the student has been classified. (34 CFR 300.304). Comprehensive special education evaluations are conducted in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner; non-discriminatory for students of all cultural, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and other backgrounds.

Assessment data and other information about the student plays a central role in special education evaluation, instructional planning, and in reviewing student progress. During a comprehensive evaluation, the IEP team collectively gathers reliable and valid data and other information from a variety of sources to make accurate and non-discriminatory decisions about a student's eligibility or continuing eligibility, strengths, disability-related needs, and subsequent IEP and placement. Teams are encouraged to use the RIOT-ICEL framework before and throughout the evaluation to ensure data and other information used during the evaluation process was collected through multiple means including Review, Interview, Observation, and Testing (RIOT) to answer developmentally and educationally relevant questions about Instruction, Curriculum, Environment, as well as the student (Learner) (ICEL).

While the specific features of the IDEA disability categories vary, all include these two core concepts: (1) a physical or mental condition that (2) adversely affects access, engagement, and progress in age or grade-level general education instruction, environments, and other activities. When examining how these two parts of the definition of "disability" apply to a particular student, IEP teams may find the six areas of academic and functional skill, described in this guidance, to be helpful for completing a comprehensive special education evaluation. Not only do the six areas correspond with the academic and functional skills addressed across the twelve disability categories outlined in federal regulations and state rules (see Wis. Admin. Code sec.PI 11.36), but they also reflect potential areas of disability-related educational need, whether or not commonly linked to a particular disability category. This is particularly important for IEP development when a student is found eligible or continues to be eligible to receive special education services.

Using the Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill as Part of a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

The six areas of academic and functional skill represent interrelated knowledge, skills, and habits. Any one skill, such as self-regulation, will often interact with and affect skills within one or more of the other six areas. Additionally, even when a skill seems to fall clearly under only one of the six areas, it is likely that one or more of the other areas is having an effect on that area or vice versa. For example, a student who was referred for an evaluation or reevaluation because of reading challenges may also be experiencing challenges in communication skills that are affecting their reading skills.

Asking the right developmentally and educationally relevant questions can help identify which areas may be interacting to create barriers to learning and may uncover strengths that can be used as assets to promote learning. For example, when evaluating a student who is suspected of being deaf or hard of hearing, it seems obvious that assessment data will be needed in the physical and health area. However, the IEP team must also consider the potential impact of this physical and health characteristic on each of the other areas. For example, a hearing impairment can have an educationally relevant effect, both in terms of strengths and needs, on a child's functioning in each of the other areas. Asking developmentally and educationally relevant questions in ALL areas at the start of the evaluation process is critical to determining the effects of this individual student's disability and not overly focusing on the student's disability category. In summary, while individual academic or functional skills within a single area may be explored in isolation, it is imperative that IEP teams understand that such skills do not exist in a vacuum and consider all assessment data within the context of a comprehensive special education evaluation in order to truly understand the student's strengths and needs.

The IDEA requires that assessments used within a comprehensive special education evaluation be non-discriminatory on a racial or ethnic basis. Considering each of the six areas at the start of a comprehensive special education evaluation during the review of existing data assists IEP teams in addressing racial, ethnic, and other types of bias that may influence decisions on what information is needed to complete the evaluation. For more information about conducting culturally responsive special education evaluations and addressing systemic and racial referral and evaluation bias within an equitable MLSS, see the [Addressing Bias in a Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation section of this framework](#).

When the team considers the six areas of academic and functional skill during the evaluation process, it can feel confident that it has explored all potential areas of need, has sufficient information about the effects of the student's disability, and has identified corresponding educational needs. **Considering the six areas does not necessarily mean the student's IEP team must conduct assessments to collect additional information about each of the six areas.** Using the six areas as a guide for generating student-specific developmentally and educationally relevant questions when reviewing existing data at the beginning of the evaluation process
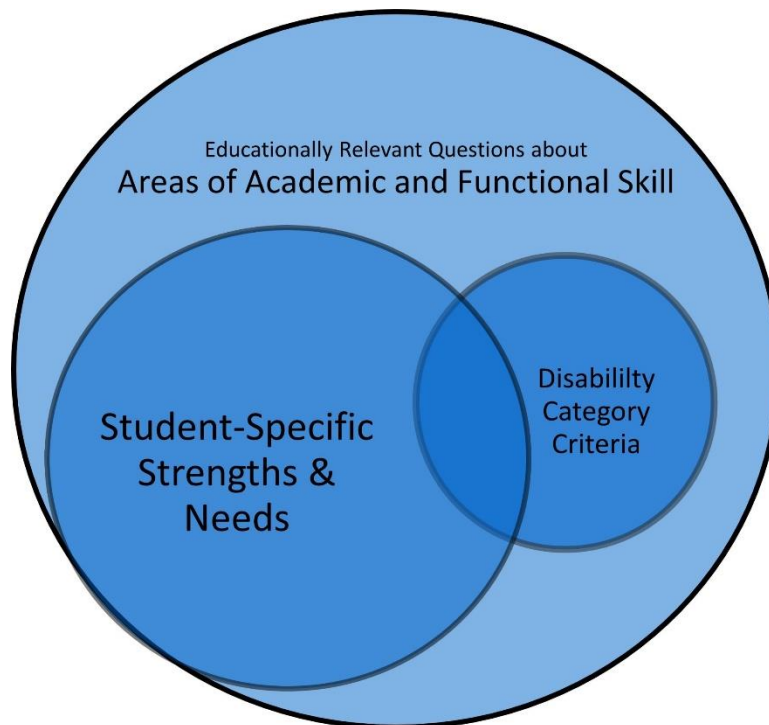
increases the likelihood that the IEP team will not miss anything important, will complete a comprehensive evaluation, and will subsequently develop an IEP that addresses all of an eligible student's disability-related educational needs and capitalizes on student strengths. If the student is not found eligible upon initial evaluation or reevaluation, information on academic and functional skills in any of the six areas is used to develop general education recommendations, including when a student is found eligible for protection under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The following graphic summarizes the relationship between the six areas and the questions every comprehensive evaluation must answer:

1) Does the student meet criteria for a disability category and as a result requires special education and,

2) What are the student's educational needs helpful for IEP development, irrespective of the student's category of disability.

Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

Linkages between Sources of Information as Applied to Evaluation Questions

Educationally Relevant Questions about
Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

Student-Specific
Strengths &
Needs

Disabililty
Category
Criteria

The Six Areas of Academic and Functional Skill

This document was developed to provide a focused definition of discrete categories of observable and measurable student academic and functional skill (or behavior). No assumptions are made about ecological or other factors that may cause or influence student performance in any of the six areas or affect the assessment of performance within the six areas. For example, trauma, mental health, nutrition, cultural and linguistic diversity, or other complex factors may help explain why a student demonstrated a certain skill level or behavior response. The effects of such factors are of great importance, and it is expected that individual evaluators and IEP teams consider them when selecting measurement tools and when interpreting and using assessment data and other information to make educational decisions. While not addressed in this particular document, the influence of such ecological or other factors and their important role in IEP team activities and decisions is addressed in other guidance.

Strengths or needs in any of the six areas do not either predetermine or exclude a student from special education eligibility and must be explored in relation to each student's age, developmental level, home language, and cultural and ethnic norms and background. An IEP team can discuss how a student's strengths and needs in each area affect the student's access, engagement, and progress in age or grade-level curriculum, instruction and other activities, and environments. When used to develop developmentally and educationally relevant questions, each area should be discussed in relation to different conditions for learning (i.e. environments, supports, potential barriers, teaching methods, group size, relationships, etc.). For example, "what are the conditions when the student is most successful at demonstrating reading skill?"

The following six areas of academic and functional skill are provided as a resource for educators, families, and others who engage with students who are experiencing educational challenges. **Specifically, they are intended to serve as a guide for developing, reflecting on, and organizing developmentally and educationally relevant questions** when planning and conducting a comprehensive special education evaluation aimed at accurately identifying a student's pattern of strengths and disability-related needs.

Academics

Includes knowledge, skills, and habits within specific content areas such as reading, written language, mathematics, science, disciplinary literacy, etc.

Cognitive Learning

This area includes skills and habits involved in processing and comprehending information gathered through the senses in order to acquire and use knowledge and skills. There are several theoretical models of cognition and learning that have a sound base of research that support them. Examples of cognitive learning skills include but are not limited to executive functioning skills (i.e. planning, focus, organization, impulse control), information processing skills (i.e. storing information/memory, cognitive fluency), problem solving, knowledge, and reasoning. Examples of specific importance to early learners (ages 3-6), include but are not limited to imitation, discrimination, representation, classification, sequencing, and problem solving as observed in a child's play.

Communication

This area includes knowledge, skills, and habits in the understanding and use of language for communication including speech skills (sound production, fluency, voice), social and pragmatic language abilities, and includes understanding of students with limited verbal communication that require the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems. This area also incorporates consideration of language difference (e.g., home language or use of dialect) as it applies to communication within school environments.

Independence and Self-Determination

This area includes life-long knowledge, skills, and habits relating to self-identifying individual strengths and needs; asking for help; self-advocacy; negotiating support; self-care and hygiene; safety; navigating community settings; organization; goal setting; work and employment skills; decision-making; maintaining and generalizing skills across environments, people, and contexts; and use of technology, social media, and assistive technology.

Physical and Health

This area includes physical conditions relating to vision, hearing, and other senses (e.g., vestibular, proprioception, olfactory, tasteoral, auditory, visual, tactile); as well as skills in areas of gross and fine motor; motor planning; feeding, eating, and swallowing; touch; balance; endurance; alertness; attention; vitality; auditory and visual processing; orientation and mobility; and other areas of physical health.

Social and Emotional Learning

This area includes knowledge, skills, and habits relating to social and reciprocal adult and peer relationships; identifying and communicating individual needs; perspective taking; emotional awareness and expression; managing transitions; self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence; self-management and regulation; play skills; resiliency; and receiving and responding to feedback.

Summary

The six areas of academic and functional skill represent within-student "skills and behaviors" aligned with educationally relevant questions IEP team members and others may ask about a student. Through the evaluation process, understanding and identifying individual student strengths and needs related to these areas leads to identifying educational services and supports necessary for the student to become college, career, and community ready.

It is anticipated that considering the six areas using the RIOT-ICEL framework will be most useful at the start of the evaluation process during the review of existing data and evaluation planning step. Using this resource to guide discussion about areas of concern and strength may help IEP teams more efficiently identify important information that already exists, and what additional data and other information may be needed to complete the evaluation. This list does not imply nor provide guidance on specific types of assessment tools used to gather additional information (e.g., norm-referenced, criterion-referenced and dynamic assessments; observations in varied environments; progress monitoring probes, etc.) and is not an exhaustive list of potential areas that may need to be assessed. For additional information on assessment methods, strategies, and tools, see the DPI resource *Categories and Types of Assessment*.