



COMPREHENSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATION

Vulnerable Decision Point 2: Identifying Potential Areas of Strength and Need at the Start of an Evaluation during Referral and Review of Existing Data

When an IEP team forms and is able to create a set of norms that allow for open, honest dialogue, then the team is well-situated to begin the evaluation process. During the special education evaluation process, the IEP team is charged with gathering and analyzing a variety of data to:

- 1) make accurate decisions about a student's eligibility or continuing eligibility and,
- 2) to determine the educational needs of the student useful for IEP development.

To meet this charge, the IEP evaluation team systematically gathers and analyzes evidence-based data in order to explore educationally relevant questions, determine why the student is experiencing educational challenges, (i.e, root cause analysis) and to identify student strengths and disability-related needs. Ultimately, information gathered during a [comprehensive special education evaluation](#) is used to inform IEP development or review, which always follows an evaluation. The results of an evaluation help the student's IEP team identify IEP goals and services to address the student's disability related needs and enable students to access, engage, and make progress in age or grade level general education curriculum, instruction, environments, and other school activities, so they are college and career ready. Thus, the specific IEP goals and type, frequency, amount, duration, and location of IEP services is not determined until the IEP team develops or reviews the student's IEP, after the evaluation is completed and a student is found eligible or continues to be eligible to receive special education services.

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Importantly, the purpose of special education evaluation teams is not limited to identifying which disability category criteria a student meets to be eligible for special education. Although meeting one of the twelve criteria in [Wisconsin Administrative Code, Section PI 11.36](#) is a necessary component of the evaluation process, it is not the end goal. Distinguishing the overall purpose of the team's charge is critical, so that teams do not truncate the special education evaluation process by stopping short of the ultimate goal, which is to gather the data necessary to create the conditions for student success. With this understanding of the overall purpose, teams can have a clearer focus on gathering the information needed to not just determine whether a student meets or continues to meet criteria for a disability category, but ultimately, to provide a comprehensive set of college and career ready services to students.

To begin the special education evaluation process, teams first need to develop an understanding of concerns about the student's academic and functional performance related to the reason for referral or request for reevaluation. This is best done through an exploration of educationally relevant questions about student concerns and strengths. Teams can then develop hypotheses to explore concerns representing particular areas of potential need and develop an evaluation plan to further explore the hypotheses and answer the educationally relevant questions. Once such hypotheses are developed, the team can decide what if any additional information may be needed so IEP teams can proceed to complete the evaluation and identify the disability-related needs that will need to be addressed to help students access, engage, and make progress in age or grade level curriculum, instruction, environments, and activities so they become college and career ready. It is important to note that bias can manifest and influence the educationally relevant questions asked and hypotheses developed, as well as the data that is collected. For this reason, identifying potential areas of need in the referral and during the review of existing data represents vulnerable decision points during the special education evaluation process.

How Implicit Bias Shows Up

Special education teams begin the evaluation process when they receive an initial special education referral or request for a reevaluation. Initial referrals can come from a number of sources; however, most come from classroom teachers or parents. Once schools receive these referrals, they must assign an IEP team and notify the parent (who will be part of the team). The team then plans the evaluation during, "the review of existing data."

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The review begins with the team analyzing the information provided in the referral or request for reevaluation and can use Margolis' Instructionally Relevant Question (2018) framework to identify educationally relevant questions that can help guide the review of existing data. The team then determines what existing data is available and what additional information (if any) is needed in order to make eligibility or continuing eligibility decisions, and to identify the student's educational needs and other information helpful for IEP development. The review would include compiling information from multiple sources, such as record reviews, interviews with the student, parents, or family members, observations of the student, rating scales, or other formal or information assessment or additional information relevant to answering the educationally relevant questions related to determining eligibility and informing IEP development, if the student is found eligible.

During this step, bias can first manifest when IEP team participants overly-rely on the referral by only seeking out data based on the information presented in the referral. For example, a teacher might report that the student's performance is significantly below grade level in reading and multiple interventions have been attempted, but the student continues to significantly underperform. The team may then only collect data about the student's reading skill, sufficient to apply eligibility criteria to determine if the student has a specific learning disability. It is logical for teams to take this path, but the problem is that this narrow focus limits the opportunity to identify other potential areas where the student might be having difficulty. It limits the team's consideration of other factors that may be contributing to or creating the reading difficulties, and importantly, the opportunity to identify the student's strengths or assets.

When teams take this approach to assessment, it is referred to as **confirmatory bias**. Confirmatory bias is "the tendency of an evaluator to agree with the preliminary hypothesis despite the lack of substantial evidence to support these findings" (O'Reilly, Northcraft, & Sabers 1989, p. 71). Simply stated, the team members seek out data to confirm the information in the referral, thus the referral information can bias the team's selection of existing data to review as well as collection of new data. In this case, the team pre-determines the likely outcome of applying the specific learning disability criteria and limits the focus of the evaluation only on verifying whether or not the student meets the criteria, rather than more broadly exploring educationally relevant questions about why the student may be demonstrating "significantly below grade-level performance in reading."

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Beyond seeking out data to confirm information in the referral or request for reevaluation, confirmatory bias can lead teams to focus on only collecting data that is required to determine a student's disability category. The problem with this approach is two-fold:

- 1) teams might lose sight of their ultimate purpose, which is to identify information related to enabling the child to engage and make progress in the general education curriculum, so they are college, community, and career ready (not just determine a disability label) and,
- 2) teams might narrowly focus on collecting data related to one specific disability category or label, which might result in the team not identifying all of the student's needs or misidentifying one or more needs.

Strategies to Reduce Bias: Special education IEP team participants can take some practical steps to reduce confirmation bias and attribution bias when they manifest during the special education evaluation process. The following suggestions are made related to Vulnerable Decision Point 2: Identifying Potential Areas of Strength and Need at the Start of an Evaluation during Referral and Review of Existing Data

Strategy 1: Reframe the Purpose of Evaluation

To reduce confirmation bias, teams have to take overt steps to prevent the information from a referral or request for reevaluation from limiting their view of potential disability-related needs, and thus the scope of the evaluation. Every special education evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the student's disability-related needs whether or not linked to a particular disability category. 34 CFR 300.304. The first step in this process is for IEP team participants to reframe the purpose of the evaluation by asking the following question at the outset of every evaluation:

- What do we know about how this student accesses, engages, and makes progress in age or grade level general education curriculum, instruction, environments, and activities so that they are college and career-ready (as opposed to what disability category the student fits)?

When IEP team participants use this as a guiding question, then teams are more likely to collect data and conduct an evaluation that provides the information necessary to create interventions that are designed to improve student

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performance. Disability category labels cannot tell you what the student needs; therefore, identifying the disability category is not the only or most important goal of the evaluation process. Describing the student's disability-related needs are the driver of the team's decisions and actions when developing the IEP; not the criteria for a specific disability area. As an added benefit of focusing on educational needs as opposed to fit with disability category criteria, the team will have sufficient information to develop a plan to meet the student's needs regardless of whether the student meets eligibility criteria. Therefore, special education evaluation teams can still serve a critical function by providing information to help create intervention plans that support students, even if they are not found eligible for special education.

Strategy 2: Obtain Multiple Perspectives on Educational Experience (Not Just on Concerns Described in the Referral)

Beyond reframing the purpose of the evaluation, IEP team participants should also obtain multiple perspectives on whether or not there are educational concerns about the student, especially parent and student input. Obtaining multiple perspectives when receiving a referral or request for a reevaluation must be a deliberative process to ensure that teams are not further engaging in confirmatory bias by only asking only a single educator, the parent(s), or a single professional about the concerns outlined in the referral. If multiple people are only asked about the information that is included in the referral, then the team runs the risk of further engaging in confirmatory bias. Instead, IEP team participants must ask questions that allow for other possibilities to emerge.

The following questions can serve as a guide on how to ask open-ended questions to the student, parent and family members, or educators and other professionals that do not narrow the focus of the concern:

- What are your child's or student's strengths academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally?
- How do these strengths help your child or student learn?
- What do you think school personnel are doing to support your child or student at school?
- Do you have any concerns about how school personnel are supporting your child or student at school?

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- Do you have any concerns about your child's or student's academic, behavioral, social and emotional functioning at school or at home?
 - If yes, please describe them.
 - If yes, please explain why you think these concerns are occurring?
- What do you think school professionals are doing to best serve your child or student?
- What do you think school professionals could do to better serve your child or student?

The discussion about the reason for a referral or reevaluation is only part of the review of existing data and evaluation planning step to broadly explore educationally relevant questions about the whole student and the student's learning environment. That is, questions about how the student accesses, engages, and makes progress in age or grade level general education instruction, environments, and activities before deciding if the IEP team has sufficient information to proceed. Parents, family members, and students should be a part of this opportunity to provide this more broad-based, objective input on the student performance, as well as the quality of educational services they are receiving.

Reflection and Application Activities

The following reflection and application activities were developed to build the knowledge, skills, and systems of adults so they can develop better systems for conducting comprehensive special education evaluations.

1. Discuss with school or district staff what each individual feels is the purpose of a special education evaluation? What "problem" is being solved by conducting a special education evaluation?
 - How might reframing the purpose of special education evaluations lead to a better evaluation plan or impact future referrals?
 - How can staff come to consensus as to the purpose of special education evaluations and how can this be shared across the school or district?

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2. What developmentally or educationally relevant questions does the IEP team use to guide evaluation planning at the start of an evaluation?
 - How might asking developmentally and educationally relevant questions at the start of an evaluation lead to better data collection and assessment?
 - What questions about the student does the IEP team have after reviewing the referral?
 - If holding a meeting to review the existing data, what additional questions do IEP team participants, including the parent, have about the student that can help guide the information collected when implementing a special education evaluation?
 - What perspectives or voices are listened to the most prior to implementing the evaluation plan? Which are heard the least? What voices and perspectives are missing?
 - What unintended consequences may occur if specific questions about student strengths and needs are not asked at the start of an evaluation?



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