

CHAPTER 3

FIND ME



The school team has a quick, accurate and transparent process for identifying students who will benefit from an individualized education plan (IEP).

► THE PROBLEM: THE “WAIT-TO-FAIL” APPROACH LEAVES STUDENTS FURTHER AND FURTHER BEHIND

To support students with disabilities, first schools have to accurately identify who they are. Doctors can usually identify the most severe disabilities in a student at an early age. Often, they can diagnose students well before they enter public school. These disabilities, like blindness or deafness, tend to be easy to spot. They have obvious symptoms and a biological basis that doctors can test.

But for milder disabilities, schools staff usually end up making the diagnosis. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states that school districts are not only responsible for assessing children from families who request special education services. They are also responsible for having a process to seek out and find these students to begin with - a duty commonly referred to as “Child Find.” This means that the district should always be looking out for students who “may” need to be assessed, regardless of whether they ultimately qualify for special education or not.

This isn’t easy. Not every student who is struggling has a disability, and not every student who has a disability may look like they are struggling. As a result, schools often wait for students to fail before evaluating them for special education services. Some schools wait to test students for a learning disability until after they have had months or even years of failing grades. Other schools wait until a student’s annual standardized test shows they are behind grade level. Sometimes, schools deliberately wait for students to develop a large discrepancy between their academic performance and their IQ. This “IQ discrepancy model” means that students have to wait far too long to get the support they need. By the time they are identified, it is often too late to catch up.

Under IDEA, a parent has the legal right to request a special education evaluation at any point in their child’s school career. But many parents don’t know this.

Alexa Posny, the former state director of special education in Kansas observed this in her state: “We were missing a lot of kids, and we were catching them way too late, because we were waiting for them to fail before we identified them.”⁵³ Teachers and administrators then interpreted any student’s struggle as a sign of a disability. Posny believes that this led them to over-identify children with disabilities by as much as 50%.

Once schools finally test students for disabilities, the National Academies' National Research Council found that the diagnosis tends to be inaccurate. The process can also be extremely slow.⁵⁴

"While we know clearly the costs of waiting too long, few school districts have in place a mechanism to identify and help children before failure takes hold," said Joseph Torgesen, a research professor at Florida State University.⁵⁵ Torgesen notes that in most cases, schools have no system-wide identification process until third grade. By that time, addressing student disabilities becomes harder and more expensive, and those students struggle to catch up.

Human judgment and bias in special education also limits who gets help

The reality now is the process to decide whether a student should receive special education services relies a lot on human judgment. This is the case from the start. Usually, the identification process begins with a subjective recommendation from a teacher that a student be evaluated. While a teacher and even a parent's recommendation can be a powerful tool to identify when students need specialized support, it is also fraught with human error, lack of expertise in disabilities, and oftentimes bias.

Far too often, racial bias also affects this process. Whether consciously or not, teachers and administrators often assume that students of color can't learn at high levels. A White student and a Black student struggling in the same ways are often treated very differently. This can also happen for English learners. These students face the same struggle as anyone learning a new language. But teachers can misinterpret their struggle as a disability and then recommend these students be evaluated. The same can happen with students who are experiencing trauma. School staff can easily misinterpret their short-term behavioral challenges as a long-term problem caused by a disability. Diagnosis of a disability requires expertise in the identification process and in the specific disability being evaluated for - expertise and training that even the best school staff often don't have.

After a student is recommended for special education evaluation, the student then meets with a school or district psychologist who runs thorough, standardized tests to determine whether the student has a disability. Though these tests provide objective data, the interpretation of the results by district and school staff can also often be subjective. For example, though a student may score numerically low in a math processing assessment, the school or district can ultimately decide that this does not affect the student's ability to succeed in math class, and is not enough to merit special education services.

This subjectivity can lead to both over- and under-identification of students. For certain racial subgroups, students are over-identified for certain disability types -- a phenomenon called "disproportionality." For example, 2.63% of all Black students, nationally, are identified with a "mental retardation" disability. Though this may not be a large number at first glance, it's almost two and half times the rate for White students.⁵⁶ While 17% of school-age children are Black, they represent 33% of students identified as mentally retarded.⁵⁷

At the same time, recent research suggests that paradoxically, under-identification is also a problem. One study compared Black and Latino students with White students at similar levels of achievement and with similar risk factors (such as low family education, low-income and low birth weight). In this analysis, the disproportionality actually reversed. They found that Black and Latino students were less likely to be identified for special education services across five disability categories. Black students were 58% less likely to be diagnosed for learning disabilities and Latino students were 29% less likely.⁵⁸ In these cases, schools deprive students of color of the services they need.

The researchers behind the study argue that this may occur because educators are often more responsive to White parents. They also argue that “low expectations regarding Black children’s abilities may also lead some professionals to ignore the neurological basis of low academic achievement and ‘problem’ behavior.”⁵⁹

In other instances, the over-identification of students of color doesn’t come from a teacher’s bias. It reflects the environmental factors that have disproportionately affected students of color. For example, 36% of urban Black children have elevated levels of lead in their blood, compared to only 4% of suburban White children. Black children are also about twice as likely to be born prematurely. They are three times more likely to suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome.⁶⁰ These factors can influence whether a student develops a learning disability.

Racial bias can affect disability diagnoses in contradictory ways. Certain students in certain areas can be overrepresented, while other students are underrepresented. At a district level, both trends can happen at the same time and hurt students. They mean services don’t get to the students who most need them.

That’s why it is crucial that school leaders and staff are aware of racial bias in its many forms. They must investigate their own process and combat whatever racial trends they may have. That way they can ensure they deliver the right services to the right students.

When schools don’t have a strong process in place for identifying students for special education services, students can struggle or even fail for far too long. They can also receive a mismatch of services that do not address the true challenges the student faces.

THE SOLUTION: SCREEN ALL STUDENTS AND INTERVENE QUICKLY

Some schools and districts have looked to the field of public health to learn how to best identify learning disabilities. Doctors screen all patients using common measures. For example, they measure every patient’s blood pressure to determine their cardiovascular health. As patients develop illnesses, doctors use more and more tests and interventions to gather information and provide care.⁶¹

Similarly, researchers say that schools should universally screen all students for learning disabilities starting in kindergarten. Rather than waiting for subjective recommendations from parents or teachers, universal screening allows teachers to pick up on potential challenges before students struggle.

For example, students with dyslexia often start to fall behind their peers in reading as early as the first grade. Studies have shown that once these early achievement gaps develop they often persist over the long-term, even if students receive intensive support later on. But when students get the support they need as early as kindergarten or pre-school, they are far more likely to catch up. When teachers introduce effective programs early they can target the basic reading foundational skills even before children learn to read. The lesson is clear: The earlier schools can diagnose student disabilities and provide students with the right support, the more likely they will be able to catch up.⁶²

A universal screening process might include a whole range of assessments. For example, it could include an IQ test, an academic achievement test, teacher or parent behavioral ratings, or structured interviews. These assessments don’t give a diagnosis.

They just provide more information. Administrators, teachers and a school or district psychologist must then interpret the data to decide whether it points toward one or more disabilities.

A special California task force of longtime educators and expert researchers focused on statewide special education policies found that universal screening and following up with appropriate intervention is the best course of action for most schools. The task force also argued these actions can prevent many academic and behavioral difficulties from developing in the first place.⁶³

The California Charter Schools Association had similar findings when they looked at charter schools with the strongest results for students with disabilities. They found that these schools' specialists provided support services to all students as needed, regardless of whether the student had been identified as having a disability. For example, one school had a speech and language pathology assistant provide intervention to all students who struggled with speech in younger grades.

Speech services started as soon as students showed any signs of struggle with speech. Some researchers believe that these early identification and prevention programs could reduce the number of students with reading problems by up to 70%.⁶⁴

Once school teams identify students with disabilities and determine interventions, they then have to measure whether the interventions have actually worked. If not, they can either create an alternative plan or increase the intensity of the interventions. Chapter 4 describes this in more detail.



WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



FIND ME

The school team has a quick, accurate and transparent process for identifying students who will benefit from an individualized education plan (IEP).

WHAT TO ASK

- How quickly does the school assess students? Do parents or teachers currently have to fight to get their child assessed?
- How accurately do schools identify students with disabilities?
- Does the school and district/CMO take steps to ensure the process is accurate, objective and bias-free?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- District / charter school network leaders have a clear process for identifying students with special needs that meets the legal requirements of “Child Find” under IDEA legislation. The process is followed throughout the year, including summer months. Leaders notify parents about policies related to special education and communicate the legal rights of parents and students.
- District / charter school network officials collect and analyze data about specific disability types and report any disproportionality in terms of race, EL status, or income.
- Schools identify students with most disabilities in early elementary grades and the district/CMO provides resources and training for implementing universal screening and early identification processes.
- The district / charter school network supports early identification through ongoing staff, community, and family education and communication. This communication is particularly present in preschool, pre-k, and kindergarten programs with targeted outreach to families that may not know their legal rights or the benefits of early identification.

SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- School team proactively sends home information to all parents, especially those with students in early grades, to explain the process for assessing and identifying students with disabilities, the timelines, and the legal rights of parents and students throughout the process.
- If a parent requests that a student be assessed for special education services, the school team acts quickly to perform complete psycho-educational assessments as required by law.
- School teams collect data from a wide variety of sources including academic assessments, behavioral checklists, and early childhood development inventories for all students, including those in early grades. Teams use this data to conduct universal screenings and identify students who need additional support and those who might benefit from special education services.
- School-wide systems are in place for sharing data about student performance and behavior, which is used to make decisions about which students are referred to be assessed and when for special education.



WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team provides early, school-wide and appropriately intensive support to all students as soon as they fall behind.
- If these interventions are not enough, the school starts a collaborative, unbiased and timely process to formally evaluate a student's need for special education services.
- The school team regularly reviews the results from the identification process to ensure that certain student groups -- particularly students of color, low-income students, and English-language learners -- are not over-identified as having a disability.
- The school team proactively communicates with families at every step of the identification process.