

Understanding Exceptional Student Education (ESE)

Each public school district provides an Exceptional Student Education (ESE) department designed to serve students with identified disabilities, as well as those identified as being gifted. They may also serve students who have met the eligibility criteria under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Students qualifying under the categories of the Visually Impaired and Deaf and Hard of Hearing are also eligible to receive services through the public school system beginning at birth, under provisions provided in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Families with children whom they suspect of having a disability, such as a developmental delay, or any other documented disability can come to the public school system through many channels offered

in each county, such as The Early Steps Program, Child Find and public screening programs. Parents can make arrangements for their child to be evaluated. Children who are identified as having a disability that impacts their educational progress and require special education services are eligible for these services beginning at the age of three.

Primary and secondary education students also have multiple opportunities to access ESE services in the traditional and charter school settings. The identification process begins with the initiation of a referral from the student's parent(s), teacher(s), guidance counselor or the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support team. Many students also transfer into local school districts from out of state or another Florida

school district having already been identified as a student with a disability under IDEA or Section 504, requiring districts to provide "comparable services." Students attending private schools are eligible to receive therapies and other related services provided by school district personnel.

Once a student is registered in his or her school and a referral for evaluation has been initiated, a team of educators, family members, and other professionals convene to discuss which evaluations will serve as an appropriate measure of the student's current levels of performance, and to obtain the parent's written permission to proceed with testing. Once the agreed-upon evaluations are completed, the team will reconvene to determine eligibility for services. For those who qualify, an individual plan is developed to address the specific and unique needs of the student. This plan is referred to as the IEP. For those who are determined to be ineligible, continued discussions regarding the types of resources and interventions the student may need to be successful in the general education setting are critical.

Students identified as needing ESE services have access to addi-

tional services, such as Extended School Year and transition services. Discussions about the appropriateness of such services occur during IEP meetings. There are a variety of transition services available, such as self-advocacy classes, information on college accommodations, High School High Tech programs, community-based vocational education options, and post-secondary transition programs. Post-secondary transition programs are designed to provide meaningful education or employment after high school graduation.

Each district provides a variety of resources that are available to parents of students identified as needing ESE and gifted services or Section 504 accommodations. Parents can often locate these resources through each district's ESE department's webpage, social media, community and parent meetings, parent support groups, or various organizations. School districts encourage parents to have meaningful involvement in their child's educational planning. If parents are not able to locate information or resources, they are encouraged to reach out to their district's ESE department for assistance. 🧩

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