

Medical diagnosis and special education eligibility

Parents are often surprised to learn that a medical diagnosis does not automatically entitle a student to special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, **there is no automatic eligibility based on a medical diagnosis.** Eligibility for special education services is based, rather, on an educational determination of a disability, which includes meeting not just the criteria for a specific disability, but also finding that a student is in need of specialized services.

If you have a student with a disability or a medical condition, they are likely to have a medical diagnosis from a trained medical professional. A lung doctor may have diagnosed your child with cystic fibrosis; a neurologist or developmental pediatrician may have diagnosed your child with an autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual disability.

An educational disability label means that your child has been identified as having one of 13 disabilities identified as eligibility categories in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) from an educational standpoint. The IDEA eligibility categories are fairly broad. Some medical diagnoses, like autism or intellectual disability, will also be an IDEA eligibility category. Other diagnoses, like cystic fibrosis or ADHD, might fall into a broader category like Other Health Impairment. These medical conditions need to be diagnosed by a physician.

Having a medical condition does not necessarily mean that your child requires special education and related services to be successful. Special education eligibility requires the student to have a disability and be in need of specialized instruction to be successful. To determine the latter, a school multidisciplinary evaluation team is established which may include various school professionals, such as teacher(s), psychologists, social workers, and related service professionals like occupational, speech-language, and physical therapists. That team conducts assessments, observations, and interviews to determine the student's strengths, needs, and challenges and reviews information that the parents provide, including reports from physicians and other specialists.

So, let's say your child has a medical diagnosis of autism. That diagnosis may or may not meet the specific criteria included in IDEA or in Michigan's special education regulations. The impact of the student's medical diagnosis may also be so minimal as to not meet the definition of a student with a disability who requires special education and related services. Therefore, the medical diagnosis will not result in eligibility for special education unless additional information is provided that changes or alters the conclusions made by the eligibility team.

To qualify for special educational services, a disability must impact the student's learning and his or her ability to participate in the general education curriculum, and the student must require special education and related services to benefit from his or her education. **The fundamental distinction between a medical diagnosis and an educational determination is the impact the condition has on the students' learning.**