Evaluating ADHD and Autism Under IDEA: MET Essentials

Stacy Davis, Professional Development Coach

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Vision

Every student is prepared for success.

Mission

To build a world-class education system that equips every student with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, careers, and life in Mississippi and the world.

Strategic Plan Goals

1. Every child has access to a high-quality early childhood program and is prepared for kindergarten
2. Every student develops strong literacy and mathematics skills in all grades
3. Every student graduates prepared for success in college, career, or military service
4. Every school and district demonstrates strong academic outcomes and continuous improvement
5. Every school is fully staffed with qualified, effective teachers and leaders
6. All students attend schools and districts with safe, engaging, and supportive environments

Session Objectives

Identify ADHD evaluation and eligibility requirements.

Identify Autism evaluation and eligibility requirements.

Explore real-life scenarios utilizing IDEA requirements.

Ice Breaker

Let’s Get the Conversation Started

- Take 60 seconds to think about ADHD and Autism evaluations under IDEA
- What questions or concerns do you have about evaluating students suspect Autism?
- What areas of the evaluation or eligibility process would you like clarified?
- Be ready to share your questions with the group.



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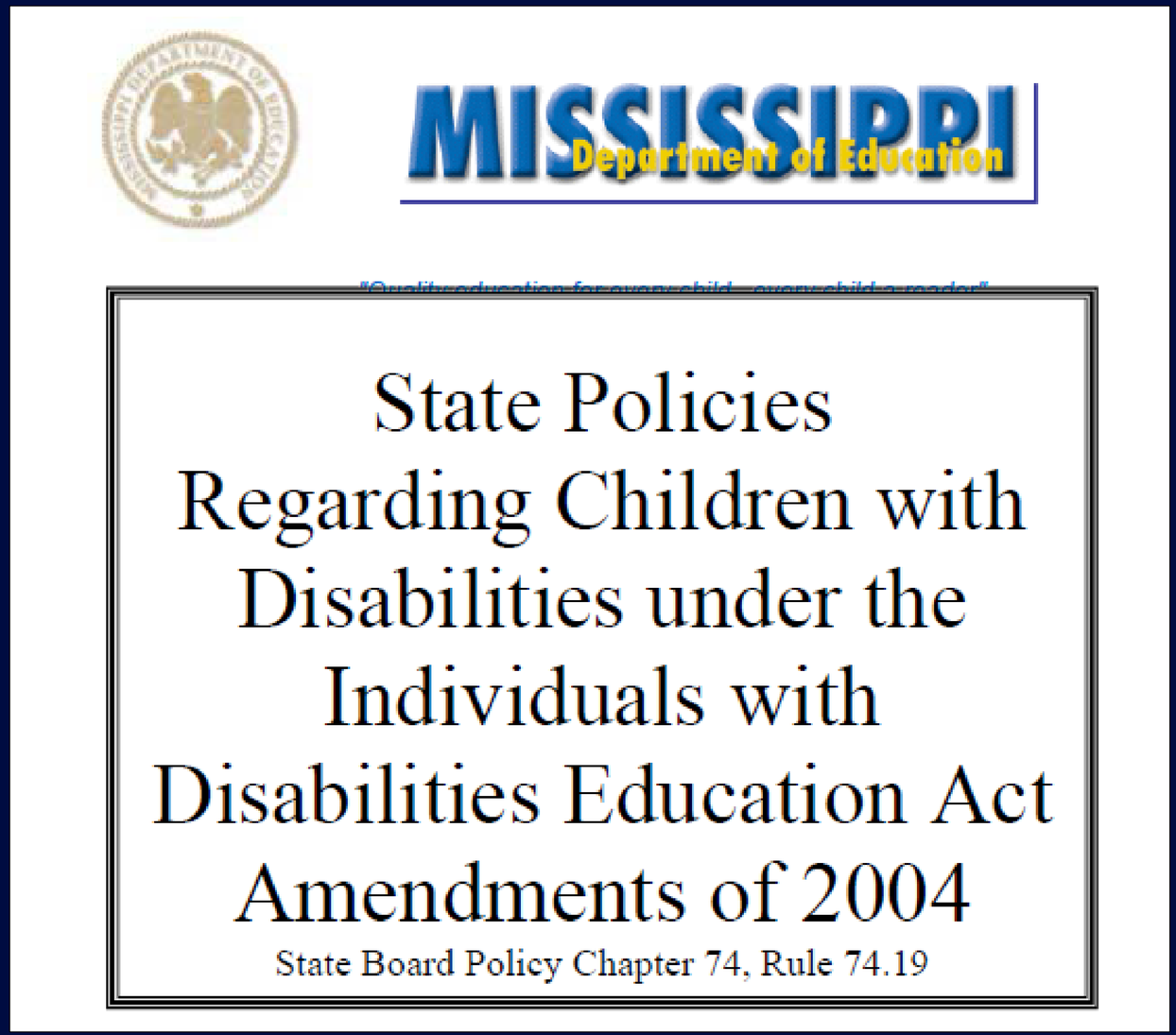
Definition of a child with a disability

300.111:

Child with a disability means a child evaluated in accordance with 300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.



The IDEA decision is bigger than a diagnosis

- A student must meet the applicable IDEA and SBP 74.19 disability definition through an appropriate evaluation.
- The disability must adversely affect educational performance under the applicable criteria.
- The student must need special education and related services by reason of the disability.
- A private medical or clinical diagnosis is important information but is not an automatic school eligibility decision.
- A student may have a diagnosis and not meet IDEA eligibility; a school team may also need to evaluate despite outside records.

Non-negotiables for every MET evaluation

- Use multiple tools and strategies; no single test, rating scale, or diagnosis decides eligibility.
- Assess every area related to the suspected disability—not just the referral reason.
- Include parent input, teacher observations, developmental and educational history, records, and direct assessment as appropriate.
- Use valid tools for the purpose intended; consider language, culture, disability access, and standardized administration.
- Make the evaluation sufficiently comprehensive to identify all special education and related-service needs.

Start With Questions, Not A Test Kit

Define the concern : What is happening? In which setting? How often? How long? What is the impact on access, progress, independence, or participation?

Consider explanations: Instruction and attendance? Language or cultural factors? Sleep, health, trauma, sensory or motor needs? Co-occurring conditions?

Match data to questions: Which sources can confirm, challenge, or clarify the concern? Who knows the student in different settings? What remains unknown?

Goal 1: Identify ADHD Evaluation and Eligibility Requirements.

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IDEA Definition

Other Health Impairment

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Limited strength, vitality, or alertness—including heightened alertness to environmental stimuli—resulting in limited alertness in the educational environment; due to a chronic or acute health problem (including ADHD); and adversely affecting educational performance.



Other Health Impairment (OHI)

Evaluation Requirements

When the MET is considering eligibility due to ADHD, the evaluation report and/or eligibility determination report must include the following:

- A description of the student's behaviors, settings in which the behaviors occur, antecedents leading to the behaviors, and consequences immediately following the behaviors
- Attempts to address the behaviors and the results, including office discipline referrals and disciplinary actions
- A description of how the behaviors adversely affect educational performance
- A statement as to whether the behaviors are typical for the student's age, setting, circumstances, and peer group, and if not, how the behaviors are different
- The correlation between documented behaviors and results of ADHD assessments

What Must Be Established By The MET?

Evidence relevant to the applicable state and federal criteria, educational impact, and whether the student needs special education and related services. A medical diagnosis is one source, not the whole analysis.

OHI/ADHD: Build a Multi-Source Picture

Use Rating Scales as One Part of the Evidence: Not Stand Alone

History and Health

- Parent interview and developmental history
- Outside diagnostic report, if available
- Health information/provider input as appropriate
- Medication and sleep context, without assuming causation

School Functioning

Teacher interviews and rating scales

- Observations across relevant settings/tasks
- Work samples, grades, progress and attendance
- Intervention/support response and implementation

Individual Assessment

- Academic assessment when indicated
- Cognitive assessment when it answers a question
- Executive-function/behavior measures as appropriate
- Adaptive, social-emotional, language or motor assessment when suspected

OHI/ADHD: Common Evaluation Traps

- Using only one teacher rating scale or one observation.
- Treating an outside diagnosis as the eligibility decision—or disregarding it without analysis.
- Assuming behavior is intentional, or assuming every difficulty is caused by ADHD.
- Failing to examine academic skill gaps, instruction, attendance, language, emotional factors, health, or other suspected areas.
- Describing symptoms without explaining educational impact and the need for specially designed instruction.

Goal 2: Identify Autism Evaluation and Eligibility Requirements.

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IDEA Definition

Autism

A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects educational performance. Characteristics may include repetitive activities, resistance to change, and unusual sensory responses.



Autism (AU)

Evaluation Requirements

Results of instruments, observations, and/or other data that address:

- Receptive and expressive language skills, including language semantics and pragmatics; prosody; and the need for assisted instruction
- Social interactions
- Responses to sensory experiences
- Engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements
- Resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines

Autism (AU)

Evaluation Requirements

- A developmental history and/or other documentation that serves to determine the age of onset of Autistic characteristics
- A statement by a qualified professional supporting the MET's conclusion that the student meets the eligibility criteria for Autism as defined by federal regulations and State policy. A qualified professional is defined as one of the following:

  School psychologist currently licensed by MDE.

  Psychometrist currently licensed by MDE

  Board-licensed psychologist

  Nurse Practitioner

  Physician

What Must Be Established By The MET?

Evidence relevant to the applicable state and federal criteria, educational impact, and whether the student needs special education and related services. A medical diagnosis is one source, not the whole analysis.

Autism Under IDEA: What Must Be Examined?

Important Clarifications

- Characteristics may be recognized later; age three is not an automatic cutoff.
- Consider the full developmental pattern and educational functioning.
- Under the federal definition, Autism does not apply when educational performance is adversely affected primarily because of emotional disturbance.

Autism: Triangulate Behavior Across People and Settings

Document what the student does, the context in which it occurs, and the support needed

Developmental/Family

- Early development and milestones
- Parent/caregiver interview
- Social communication history
- Routines, interests, sensory responses
- Adaptive functioning and daily living

Direct Observation

- Peer and adult interaction
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Reciprocity and shared attention
- Flexibility, repetitive patterns
- Context, prompts and supports needed

Relevant Assessment

- Speech-language/pragmatic communication
- Adaptive behavior
- Developmental or cognitive profile, as indicated
- Autism-specific tools used by qualified personnel
- Academic, sensory, motor, or behavioral needs as suspected

Autism: Common Evaluation Traps

- Relying on a single autism rating scale, checklist, or structured observation.
- Assuming fluent speech means social communication is typical—or limited speech proves autism.
- Confusing noncompliance, anxiety, trauma responses, language disorder, intellectual disability, or cultural differences with autism without analysis.
- Ignoring adaptive functioning, pragmatic language, developmental history, or educational participation.
- Failing to describe how the observed pattern affects learning, relationships, routines, independence, or access to instruction.

A medical diagnosis of ADHD automatically qualifies a student for special education services under IDEA.

False

When evaluating a student suspected of having ADHD, the MET should consider multiple sources of information, including teacher input, parent input, observations, rating scales, and academic performance.

True

If a student has average grades, the MET can rule out ADHD or Autism as a possible disability under IDEA.

False

An Autism evaluation should consider social communication, developmental history, adaptive functioning, and other relevant characteristics in addition to standardized assessment results.

True

The MET must consider whether a student's suspected disability adversely affects educational performance and whether the student needs special education services to meet IDEA eligibility requirements.

True

MET eligibility decisions should be based on the totality of relevant evaluation data and the applicable IDEA criteria, rather than on a single test score or diagnosis.

True

Goal 3: Explore Real Life Scenarios Utilizing IDEA Requirements.

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From Evidence to an Eligibility Decision

If the evidence is incomplete, identify the gap and follow evaluation procedures; DO not fill in with assumptions

What Do We Know?

Summarize converging and conflicting data across sources, settings, history and direct assessment.

What Criteria Apply?

Address each required element in the current Federal and Mississippi criteria; link evidence to the criterion.

What Is the Educational Impact?

Explain how the disability affects educational performance and what specialized instruction is needed.

Student Scenarios

Join your assigned group.

Review your student scenario.

Identify key data points.

Make appropriate recommendations.

Record on poster paper.

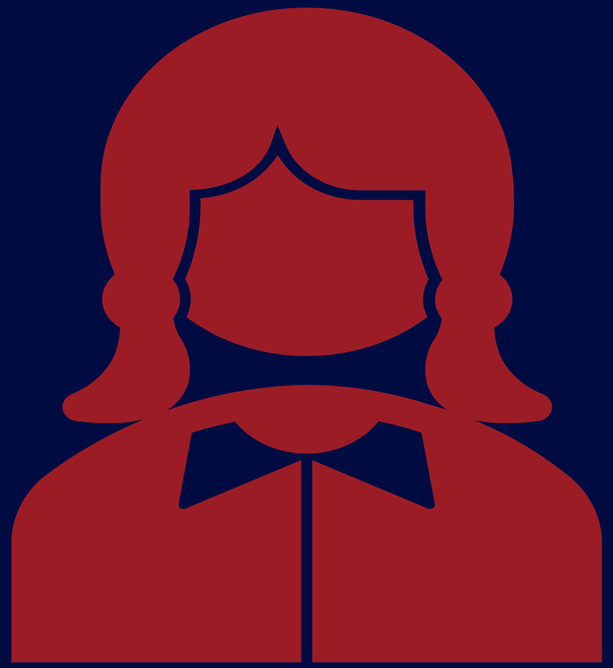
Be prepared to share.



Student Scenarios

Emily

Grade 4 student has a physician's ADHD diagnosis. One teacher rating is elevated; another is not. Work completion is low, reading skills are below grade level, and attendance was inconsistent. Parent reports difficulty with routines at home.



Discuss

What do we know?

What do we still need?

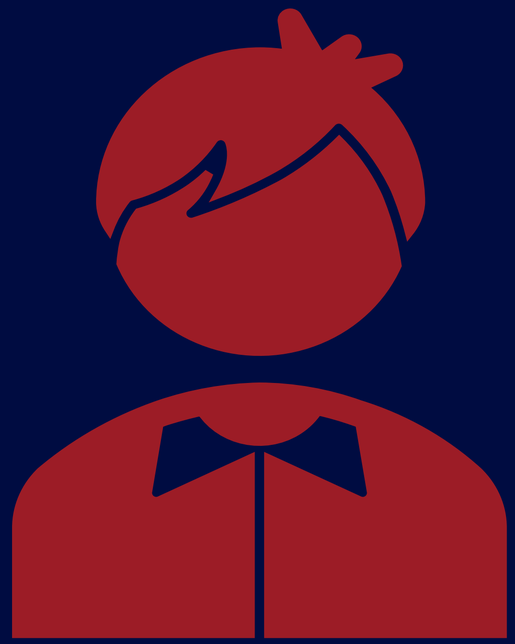
Which data would answer the referral questions?

What must be established for IDEA eligibility?

Student Scenarios

Jackson

Grade 2 student has an outside autism report. Teacher notes limited peer interaction and distress with schedule changes. Student uses fluent speech, has strong factual interests, and completes academic work well when routines are predictable.



Discuss

What do we know?

What do we still need?

Which data would answer the referral questions?

What must be established for IDEA eligibility?

Met Essentials

Final Quality Check

- Referral concerns translated into clear evaluation questions
- Parent, teacher, record review and observation data considered
- All suspected areas assessed with appropriate tools
- Outside diagnosis information reviewed and integrated appropriately
- Language, culture, access needs and test limitation addressed
- Conflicting information and alternative explanations discussed
- Findings linked to current state and federal eligibility criteria
- Educational impact and need for special education clearly explained

- IDEA regulations — 34 CFR §300.8, Child with a disability (OHI and autism definitions)
- IDEA regulations — 34 CFR §300.304, Evaluation procedures
- IDEA regulations — 34 CFR §300.305, Additional requirements for evaluations and reevaluations
- IDEA regulations — 34 CFR §300.306, Determination of eligibility
- Mississippi State Board Policy 74.19

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sdavis@mdek12.org

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