

# TODAY'S SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Practical Guidance for Your District, Your Position and Your Career

Route to:


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## COVER STORY: ELIGIBILITY

### Help parents understand when autism evaluation is unnecessary

Parents are increasingly aware of the intensity of services some students with autism receive. This can lead some parents to seek an autism evaluation for their child with disabilities where none is necessary.

#### Key points

- Review existing data to dispel parent concerns about autism.
- Conduct observations to clarify student's behavior.
- Document consideration of IEEs. ■

Two cases illustrate this. The parents in *In re: Student with a Disability*, 113 LRP 26979 (SEA KY 04/25/13), failed to prove that their child with post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive deficits, and speech-language difficulties also needed an

autism evaluation. The district successfully showed the student had average social skills and typical interactions with nondisabled peers.

In *Lewisville Independent School District*, 113 LRP 15002 (SEA TX 01/07/13), the school system showed that its evaluative data did not match the information in the independent educational evaluation of a student with an emotional disturbance and that its proposed IEP addressed the student's needs.

Take cues from these cases to know how to respond when parents request an autism evaluation for their child who has other disabilities. Look at your existing data to determine if the student exhibits any autism traits. Conduct observations of the student to see if he displays behavior contrary to an autism identification. And thoroughly

consider and discuss private assessments with parents.

"Sorting through the motivation behind parent requests for autism evaluations is a large part of my job," said Kerri Wright, autism specialist at New Hanover County (N.C.) Schools. "Some parents hope that if their child is identified with autism, we will have all of these strategies that will be able to help him. They may not be aware that a medical diagnosis may not affect a student in the educational setting."

Take these steps to help parents understand when an autism evaluation is unnecessary:

✓ **Look at existing data:** Gauge the quality of the documents you already have on file about the child, said Julie Fay, a school attorney at Shipman & Goodwin LLP in Hartford, Conn. Are your district's evaluations current and valid? "The kids in the Kentucky and Texas cases both had very complex profiles and had been evaluated multiple times over many years with numerous diagnoses," Fay said. "The districts had a lot of data to support why they didn't think the students had autism."

✓ **Conduct, encourage observations:** Be sure to observe the student and ask colleagues to observe the student in different situations to see if any traits associated with autism are emerging at school, Wright said. "If educators are not seeing social communication delays or interaction difficulties with peers, meltdowns, hyperfocus on a particular topic, or repetitive behaviors," she said, "you would not need to assess that child. The medical diagnosis would not be affecting his education." Share examples with parents so they can see why the classification doesn't fit.

"If the child went up to an upset child on the playground, put his arm around him, and asked if

he was OK, he's showing he has empathy," Wright said. "That's a positive skill you can share with parents" that you may not see in children with autism.

✓ **Discuss outside evaluations:** Under the IDEA, you have to consider any IEEs parents share with you. 34 CFR 300.502(c)(1). But you do not have to agree with or adopt the results, Fay said. "Look at what the evaluation says about the student's strengths and weaknesses and have a formal discussion about it with the IEP team, including the parents," she said. And document your discussion, Wright said.

"You need to be clear on what happened in the meeting and have evidence if you need to go back

to it later," she said. "You'll want to talk about the difference between the criteria of the DSM-5 and of the IDEA."

Clarify for parents that the IDEA only allows for one official disability category, Fay said, but that you and your colleagues will consider all of the student's areas of need when determining his programming.

*Resource: The 90-minute audio CD Quick and Practical Strategies to Improve Classroom Behavior of Students With High-Functioning Autism is available at [www.shoplrp.com/product/p-3801.102413.html](http://www.shoplrp.com/product/p-3801.102413.html). ■*