ELIGIBILITY MEETING: A QUICK GUIDE

How schools decide eligibility

What the team looks at, and where you fit in.

The evaluation is done, and a team is about to tell you whether your child qualifies for special education. That moment carries a lot of weight. Knowing how they decide helps you walk in as a participant.

START HERE

Eligibility is not the same as a diagnosis. A diagnosis from a doctor or outside specialist doesn't automatically make your child eligible. The school has to consider it, but it isn't the deciding factor. Under IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), a team decides, using set criteria. You are part of that team.

The three-part test

To qualify, your child has to meet all three. The team works through each one at the meeting.

1. **Is there a disability in one of the IDEA categories?**
   The disability has to fall under one of the federally defined eligibility categories (listed on page 2).

2. **Is it affecting your child's educational performance?**
   A child can have a diagnosed disability and still not qualify if it isn't meaningfully affecting how they access or succeed in school. The question is whether it rises to the level of needing specially designed instruction.

3. **Is the disability the main cause, and not something else?**
   This is called exclusionary criteria. The team has to rule out other explanations, like limited instructional opportunity, environmental factors or a language difference. A child still learning English may score in ways that look like a disability, and the team is legally required to account for that. This isn't the school looking for reasons to say no. It's a safeguard.

Questions to ask at the meeting

- [ ] Which categories did you consider for my child, and why?
- [ ] How is this affecting my child's performance at school?
- [ ] What other explanations did you rule out, and how?

The eligibility categories

You don't need to memorize these. It just helps to know your child's evaluation was designed to see whether any of them apply.

- Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Other Health Impairment (OHI), often where ADHD falls
- Emotional Disturbance
- Intellectual Disability
- Developmental Delay (younger children, typically ages 3 to 9)
- Deaf-Blindness
- Deafness
- Hearing Impairment
- Visual Impairment, including Blindness
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Multiple Disabilities

A child can qualify under more than one category. The primary one drives the services, and the team accounts for any others in the IEP. That's common.

Your rights at the meeting

- You are a required and equal member of the team.
- You should get the evaluation reports before the meeting, generally at least three school days ahead. If your state doesn't require it, ask for them.
- You can bring someone for support: a family member, friend or advocate.
- You can ask questions and take time before signing anything.
- You can disagree with the decision.

Before the meeting

- [ ] Read the reports and write down anything you don't understand.
- [ ] Note where you agree or disagree with how the reports describe your child.
- [ ] Jot down a few things you see at home that the team can't see at school.
- [ ] Bring someone with you if you'll want support.
- [ ] Remember: you don't have to sign anything at the meeting.

If your child qualifies, the team starts building an IEP (Individualized Education Program), and you help build it. Special education is not a place. It's a plan you help create. **If the answer is no,** there are next steps for that too.

MY NOTES

Want help with this? Book a free 15-minute call at myaccessadvocacy.com.

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