

A PEATC

Do You Know....



Factsheet for Virginia's Parents

Medical diagnosis vs. Educational label--Impact on Eligibility

Medical diagnosis vs. Educational Label

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.

It's natural to think that if you have a diagnosis from a physician or other health professional, that your child would automatically be eligible for special education services through the local school system. But that's not the case; **there is no automatic eligibility based on a medical diagnosis.**

A **disability educational label** means that your child has been identified as having one of 14 disabilities identified as eligibility categories in the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). You can see these categories on the next page and for more information, see *PEATC Resource Document on Eligibility Categories*.

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*.

So, What Does that Really Mean?

So, you may be thinking, what's the difference? The disability categories listed above, have to be diagnosed and a physician or medical professional is doing the diagnosing. That's true. But **having a medical condition does not necessarily mean that your child requires special education and related services.**

In order to be eligible under IDEA, the student must have one or more of the IDEA specified disabilities **AND** be in need of special services.

Resources

The Arc Minnesota – [Arc Guide to Medical Diagnosis of Disability vs. Eligibility for Special Education Services](#)

CAR Autism Roadmap – [Medical Diagnosis vs. Educational Eligibility for Special Services: Important Distinctions for Those Diagnosed with ASD](#)

VDOE – [Parents' Guide to Special Education](#)

VDOE – [Regulations Governing Special Education Programs in Virginia](#)

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To determine the latter, a **school eligibility team** is established which includes various school professionals (administrator, teacher(s), psychologist, social worker, related service professionals like occupational, speech language, and physical therapists) and the student's parents.

That team conducts **assessments 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 Virginia's state special education regulations. The impact of the student's medical diagnosis may 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.

The 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.

WITHIN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS AND AN ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATION IS THE IMPACT THE CONDITION HAS ON STUDENT LEARNING.

Treatment vs. Education?

The difference may seem obvious when you think about conditions like cancer, psychiatric conditions, substance abuse. But it is less obvious with other diagnoses. Treatment addresses medical issues. Your child may be on medication for an anxiety disorder; that is medical treatment. The school, however, would focus on your child's academic and functional needs in light of the anxiety disorder. Services are driven by an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, not by a medical team. Collaboration and cooperation, however, is a key to student success.

IDEA Disability Eligibility Categories

- Autism
- Blindness
- Developmental Delay (*if used in your school division up to age 6*)
- Emotional Disability
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disabilities
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment



PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.



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