

Navigating the School System

As a parent, we always want to be able to support our children in the best way possible. When children struggle at school, there are steps that parents can take to advocate for their child within the school setting. This handout provides parents with basic information about the school system and how to officially seek help.

CHILD FIND

Child Find is part of a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under this law, schools have the responsibility to find children (from birth through age 21) who have developmental delays and/or disabilities and need services. However, in the state of Michigan, programs and services are provided from birth to age 26. Depending on the age of your child, (s)he can receive home-based early intervention services, attend early childhood special education programs, and/or receive special education services at school. All public agencies within the state of Michigan must follow the special education rules outlined in the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE). The Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education describes the thirteen special education categories and the specific criteria that children must meet in order to qualify for services. A child can receive special education services if they are deemed eligible under one of the 13 eligibility categories outlined in MARSE, AND if there is a demonstrated need for such services.

CHILDREN BIRTH TO 3 YEARS OLD

Children can begin to receive services when they are infants. If there is reason to suspect that the child is developmentally delayed (e.g., speech and language impairment; gross or fine motor delay), has a physical or mental condition (e.g., hearing or vision impairment, intellectual disability, genetic disorders, birth defects), or an outside diagnosis (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder), a referral can be made to Early On. Anyone who works with the child (e.g., parent/guardian, pediatrician, daycare provider, teacher, etc.) can make a referral. Referrals can be made online or via phone call (see *Navigating the School System Birth to 5* handout).

A child is eligible for Early On Part C services with a 20% delay in one developmental area or with an established condition. A child might also be eligible for Michigan Mandatory Special Education services if he or she meets eligibility criteria under the Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education. A child who qualifies for Early ON Part C AND Michigan Mandatory Special Education Services can receive more frequent and specialized services than a child who only qualifies for Early ON Part C programming.

CHILDREN BIRTH TO 3 YEARS OLD (CONT.)

Once a referral is made, a service coordinator will be appointed to the case and a request to evaluate the child will be sent to the parents within 10 calendar days of receiving the referral. Service providers come from the Intermediate School District (ISD) and can include speech and language pathologists, social workers, mental health specialists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists. Once the parents give consent for an evaluation and depending on the presenting concern, a service provider or a team of service providers will begin a comprehensive assessment. A comprehensive assessment looks at the child's overall development (e.g., gross and fine motor skills, cognitive abilities, language, hearing and vision) and current functioning (i.e., what can the child currently do). The service provider(s) has 45 school days to complete the assessment and make a decision. If it is determined that the child qualifies for services, an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) will be created. An IFSP is a legal document that outlines the services the child will receive. Early On services are provided in a child's natural environment such as a family setting or community setting.

If the child still needs special education services between ages 2.6 and age 3, the team will hold a transition meeting to create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), what is commonly referred to as a Part B program, to determine what supports and services the child continues to need in their local school district.

CHILDREN 3-5 YEARS-OLD

Children ages 3-5 can also receive services through their local school district. If a child has not previously received services through Early On and the parent/caregiver or teacher has concerns about the child's development, a referral can be made through Build Up Michigan. Referrals can be made online or via phone call (see *Navigating the School System Birth to 5* handout).

Once a referral is made, a service coordinator will contact the parents or caregiver to determine who should be appointed to the case. Similar to the process described above, if it is determined that an evaluation is necessary, a request to evaluate the child will be sent to the parents within 10 calendar days of receiving the referral and a comprehensive assessment will be completed within 30 school days. If it is determined that the child qualifies for services, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be created to outline the services the child needs. Services can be provided in an Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) classroom, with half day or full day options, if determined that this is the best placement for a child, OR, he or she can receive "walk-in" services at their local school district.

SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN (K-12+)

For children who received services through Early On or Build Up Michigan, once the child enters kindergarten, the school team will do a comprehensive re-evaluation to determine if services are still needed and if so, which special education category the student qualifies for services.

Many children are not identified as needing services until they are school-aged (i.e., in kindergarten or older). Once a parent, teacher, or other school personnel suspects that a student has a disability (e.g., learning disability, cognitive impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder, etc.), (s)he can request that a school evaluation be done. Parents should send a written request to have their child evaluated to the school principal and child's teacher (see *Navigating the School System K-12+* handout). A teacher may share his/her concerns at a team problem-solving meeting (or child study meeting) and will make a request to the principal and/or school psychologist to have the child further evaluated. Once a request to evaluate the child has been submitted, the school has 30 school days to complete the evaluation and determine if the child qualifies for services. A comprehensive evaluation typically includes a review of the child's records (i.e., report cards, developmental history), cognitive assessment, academic assessment, and in-class observation(s) of the child, parent, teacher, and child interviews. Depending on the referring concern, additional assessments to look at the child's adaptive functioning, behavior, and social-emotional functioning may be given.

SUMMARY

As a parent or caregiver, you are your child's best advocate. Unfortunately, navigating the school system and knowing who to go to in order to get services for your child can be really challenging. However, have hope! There are a wide range of services available to your child. Talking with teachers, school personnel, and other families who have had similar experiences can be really helpful. Provided below are a list of templates and resources to navigate the school system.

Written Request Templates for Evaluations

EARLY ON/BUILD UP REFERRAL

Hello,

My name is _____. My son/daughter is _____ and (s)he is X years-old. I'm writing to officially request an evaluation to determine special education services for our son/daughter. I am concerned with [child's name] difficulties with [list concerns]. We would like him/her to be evaluated as soon as possible, so that we can determine if special education services and accommodations are needed.

Thank you for your time,
[Parent Name]

SCHOOL-AGED REQUEST

Previous Clinical Diagnosis:

Hello [Principal's Name] and [Teacher's Name]

My name is _____. I am _____'s mother. [Child's name] will be attending _____ elementary in the fall. I'm writing to officially request an evaluation to determine special education services for our son for this coming school year. [Child's name] was diagnosed with ADHD combined type in June by Dr. X at the University of Michigan. He also has a language impairment that was identified to be 18 months behind. He is currently four years old. We would like him to be evaluated as soon as possible, so that he can begin to receive services.

Thank you for your time,

[Parent Name]

No Prior History:

Hello [Principal's Name] and [Teacher's Name]

My name is _____. I am _____'s mother. I'm writing to officially request an evaluation to determine special education services for our daughter. I am concerned with [child's name] difficulties with [list concerns]. We would like her to be evaluated as soon as possible, so that we can determine if special education services and accommodations are needed.

Thank you for your time,
[Parent Name]

Referrals

REFERRAL TO EARLY ON

Make an online referral at https://1800earlyon.org/online_referral.php

OR

Call 1-800-Early-On (1-800-327-5966)

REFERRAL TO BUILD UP MICHIGAN (CHILD FIND COORDINATOR)

Call your Child Find Coordinator. Find out who your coordinator is here:
<http://www.eotta.ccesa.org/Contacts.php?ID=17>

OR

Call 1-888-320-8384