



First Match

Don't miss a beat when conducting classroom observations: Review procedures

An observation in the learning environment, including in the regular classroom setting, is required when evaluating a student for a specific learning disability. [34 CFR 300.310](#) (a).

As a matter of fact, in *Cynthia K. v. Portsmouth School Department*, [76 IDELR 278](#), (D.N.H. 2020), a New Hampshire district failed to arrange a classroom observation of a first-grader's academic performance when evaluating the child for a specific learning disability. This violated the IDEA, and the district was obligated to pay for the parent's independent educational evaluation.

Districts must not overlook the importance of conducting an observation, especially when determining eligibility for special education. Review the following procedures below to properly conduct a [classroom observation](#).

Carefully sift out observers

Having the right staff conduct the observation is crucial. For an eligibility determination, it's best to conduct several different types of observations. They may be performed by school psychologists, school counselors, supervisors, case managers, or special education teachers, said Christina Stephanos, a school attorney at Sweet, Stevens, Katz, and Williams LLP in New Britain, Pa.

"It's usually a tag-team effort, but it really depends on what we're looking at in the evaluation," she said.

Another thing to note is ensuring the observer has access to perform the observation. School staff should already have completed their background check, said Stephanos. If an outside agency conducts the observation, be sure to follow your district policy on background checks. Check on when and how often an outside agency can serve a student in the special ed setting, she said.

Notify teacher of observation

"I think professional courtesy would be to say, 'I'm coming in to observe the student,'" said Stephanos. "I think it's very helpful to understand what the teacher is doing at that point in time because you want to make the observation an appropriate means of evaluating the student."

Having an open relationship with the teacher can also benefit the observer, as a member of the multidisciplinary process, by providing helpful input on the student, she said.

"They could say, 'Listen, this is the time of the day where the student had the most difficulty. I think it's really helpful for you to see the student in this light.' Or say, 'This activity will provide you with additional data that you might not get if you observe the student on Monday instead of Tuesday,'" Stephanos said.

Observe thoroughly, collect data

"I think it's important for the person who is completing the observation to look at areas of need, as well as structured versus unstructured time of the student's day to make a determination on when they observe the child," said Stephanos.

She said the observer should also collect data in the following areas including, but not limited to:

- Socialization between the student and his peers.
- Responses and interactions with the teacher.
- Recovery when not very responsive to initial instruction.
- Time the student appears to be on or off task.
- Use of peers to assist them in class.
- Participation in a small and large group setting.

"It's helpful to, sometimes, conduct an observation, and you may then learn from that observation whether you should collect additional data in certain areas of functioning for that student," Stephanos said.

Be discreet

"We don't want the students to know that they're being observed," said Stephanos.

Have the observer blend into the classroom by sitting in before students arrive to reduce distractions. The observer should avoid interactions with the students to draw less attention to his presence, she said.

"I think it's more about how we set it up and establish what's going to happen and when," said Stephanos.

If the observer is from an outside agency, then refer to district policy to minimize disruptions in the class, she said. Also, be sure to participate in the observation by taking notes because the purpose may be unclear when it's evident that the district's purpose is to benefit the student, Stephanos added.

Don't miss [*The Evaluation Files: Solving Tough Assessment Dilemmas*](#) presented by [*Jose Martin*](#) from [*Richards Lindsay & Martin, LLP*](#) at [*LRP's National Institute on Legal Issues of Educating Individuals with Disabilities®*](#) April 26-28, 2026, at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

See also:

- [Polish classroom observation procedures to guard against parent complaints](#)
- [Open door to useful classroom observations through preparation, communication](#)
- [Write On! A Guide to Compliant Documentation of Special Education Policies and Procedures -- Second Edition](#), by Mary Schillinger, M.S., EDLD, Wesley B. Parsons, Esq., Siobhan H. Cullen, Esq.

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