

North Shore

Central School District
280 Carpenter Avenue • Sea Cliff, New York 11579
(516) 277-7900 • Fax (516) 277-7905

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The Special Education Referral Process: A Family Guide

What Should Parents Do If They Have Concerns?

Start by talking with your child's teacher or service providers. Share what you are seeing at home, and ask how your child is doing in school. Reach out to the school counselor to discuss available supports and interventions. You might ask:

- What are my child's strengths and challenges?
- How does my child get along with others?
- Do you have work samples we can review together?
- What strategies are working well for my child?

If concerns continue after these conversations, contact the [Assistant Director of Special Education](#) to learn more about the referral process, next steps, and whether a CSE or 504 referral may be appropriate.

IST

If a teacher or school staff member notices that a student is struggling academically, behaviorally, or socially, the concern is brought to the Instructional Support Team (IST). The IST reviews previous strategies, recommends new interventions, and may introduce RTI/MTSS supports (see below for more information). The team monitors progress over time. If interventions are successful, they are documented and continued. If progress remains limited, the IST may recommend additional strategies or a referral to the Committee on Special Education (CSE).

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Pre-Referral Interventions: Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS/RTI)

RTI/MTSS is a schoolwide support system that helps students get the academic and behavioral help they need before considering special education. Supports are provided in levels, called tiers, based on each student's needs.

- **Tier 1:** *High-quality classroom instruction for all students, with regular progress checks.*
- **Tier 2:** *Small-group instruction or extra practice for students who need additional help.*
- **Tier 3:** *Intensive, individualized support for students needing significant intervention.*

Throughout the process, teachers collect data, adjust instruction based on progress, and share updates with families. If a student does not make progress even with these supports, the team may discuss a referral to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) or Section 504.

If MTSS/RTI supports have been implemented and the concern persists, a referral to the Office of Special Education may be necessary. Please read the next sections carefully to decide whether to submit a CSE (IEP) referral or a Section 504 referral.

What Is the Difference Between a 504 Plan and an IEP?

Both a 504 Plan and an Individualized Education Program (IEP) provide support for students with disabilities, but they are governed by different federal laws and serve different purposes.

- A 504 Plan is governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a civil rights law. **It provides accommodations and access support for students with a disability who do not require specialized instruction.** Its goal is to remove barriers so students can participate fully in the general education setting.
- An IEP is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). **An IEP is for students who meet specific eligibility criteria and require special education services and specially designed instruction to make effective progress.** The IEP outlines goals, services, accommodations, and how the school will measure progress.

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Who Qualifies For A 504 Plan, and What Does It Provide?

A student may qualify if they have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity. 504 Plans are designed to provide reasonable accommodations that support access to school.

What Settings do 504 Plans Apply To?

All school settings, including:

Classrooms

Field trips

Athletics

Clubs and after-school activities

Before/after care and summer program

[LINK: YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION ON THE 504 PROCESS HERE](#)

Who Qualifies for an IEP?

Children ages 3–21 may be eligible for special education if they meet the criteria for one of the disability categories defined by New York State (such as Learning Disability, Autism, Speech or Language Impairment, Emotional Disability, and others). Eligibility is considered when a child shows meaningful challenges in areas such as:

- Thinking and learning
- Language and communication
- Self-help skills (toileting, eating, dressing)
- Behavior and social interaction
- Physical abilities (vision, hearing, movement)

A student is not eligible for special education simply because they:

- Have academic struggles
- Have behavioral concerns
- Earn poor grades
- Learn at a different pace

Children grow and develop differently, and variations in learning alone do not always indicate a disability. Special education eligibility is determined when a disability significantly affects educational performance and the student requires specially designed instruction.

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How To Initiate A CSE Or 504 Referral

A referral must be in writing by either a parent or a school staff member.

The referral letter must include:

1. *Your child's full name, date of birth, grade, school, and your contact information.*
2. *A statement that you are requesting either a CSE or a 504 evaluation.*
3. *A statement outlining your concerns about your child's development or learning.*
4. *Summary of services your child is receiving or has previously received.*
5. *Your preferred language.*

If Your Referral Is For A 504 Plan – you must attach an official diagnosis or medical recommendation for accommodation from your child's physician. We will review the medical documentation and send you a consent form. A 504 Eligibility meeting can be scheduled as soon as we receive your initial consent.

You can skip ahead to page 10, "Contact Chain for Special Education and 504 Questions"

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS ONLY APPLICABLE TO CSE (IEP) REFERRALS:

Once the Referral is Received by the Special Education Office:

- **Confirmation Email and Required Forms**
You will receive an email from the Office of Special Education confirming that your referral was received. The email will include a request for consent and a parent referral packet that must be completed and returned in order to begin the evaluation process.
- **School Notification**
The Office of Special Education will notify your child's building principal and school psychologist that a referral has been initiated.
- **Referral Timeline**
Once your signed consent is received, the district has 60 calendar days to complete all evaluations, and 60 school days to hold the initial Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting.

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The Evaluation Process

As part of the evaluation process, schools gather information from multiple sources to understand a student's strengths and needs.

Initial CSE referrals will always include:

- Psychological testing
- Educational or academic assessments
- Classroom observation
- Physical exam (a report from your child's doctor within the last year is acceptable)
- Parent interview/Social history (completed via phone call)

Additional assessments may be included if needed, such as:

- Speech and language evaluation
- Occupational therapy (OT) evaluation
- Physical therapy (PT) evaluation
- Behavioral assessment
- Assistive technology evaluation

Evaluations are conducted in school, during the school day, as schedules allow. Depending on the type of assessment, it may be completed by a school psychologist, special education teacher, related service provider, or other qualified staff member. These evaluations will help the team determine how to best support your child in school.

Communication About Evaluations

Families will be informed of who is conducting each evaluation and will have the opportunity to ask questions at any time. Once evaluations are completed, the evaluator will typically reach out to families to review the testing results before the CSE meeting.

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The CSE/CPSE Meeting

After evaluations, the Committee (including you as a member) meets to decide eligibility. Students age 15 and older must be invited to their IEP meeting when transition planning will be discussed. There is no minimum age for a student to attend, and attendance is encouraged but not required. If the student is found eligible, the team develops an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

What an Initial CSE Meeting Looks Like (For Families New to the Process)

When all evaluations are completed, the Committee on Special Education (CSE) meets to review the results and decide whether your child qualifies for special education services. You are a full member of this team, and your voice matters.

Here is what you can expect during an initial CSE meeting:

- **Review of Evaluations:**

The team will review each evaluation, including any outside reports you choose to share, and explain the results in clear, parent-friendly language. You are welcome to ask questions at any time. Outside evaluations are thoughtfully considered as part of understanding your child's needs. Sometimes the committee may discuss different ways to address a recommendation, based on the full set of information we have. While outside recommendations are reviewed carefully, the CSE uses all available information to make decisions about what will best support the student.

- **Your Input:**

You will have time to share your concerns, ask questions, and talk about what you see at home. Your perspective is an important part of the decision-making process.

- **Eligibility Discussion:**

The team will discuss whether your child meets the criteria to receive special education services under New York State regulations.

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- **If Your Child Is Eligible:**

The team will begin creating an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This includes setting goals, identifying supports and services, and discussing the type of classroom or setting that would best meet your child's needs.

- **Next Steps:**

Before the meeting ends, the team will review next steps, timelines, and what you can expect moving forward. You will also receive copies of all documents.

You can prepare for the CSE by:

- Reviewing evaluation reports and taking notes
- Bringing questions and observations about your child
- Requesting an Interpreter or Parent Member*, if needed

- *Requests for an Interpreter or a Parent Member must be made in writing (email or letter) at least 72 hours before the meeting*
- *Parent member or Interpretation requests should be directed to Bonnie Small at smallb@northshoreschools.org*
- ***In lieu of a district-appointed Parent Member**, families may bring someone who knows their child well (such as a relative, family friend, or private provider) to the meeting for support*

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Parent Role

- You are a full member of the team. Share your perspective on your child's strengths, needs, and how they learn best.
- Ask questions until you feel confident in the plan.

****What is a "Parent Member"?**

A Parent Member is a **trained** parent of a student with a disability who can attend your child's CSE meeting at your request. Parent members are not available for 504 meetings. Parent Members help explain the CSE process, share perspective, and support families in feeling comfortable during the meeting. If you would like a Parent Member to attend your child's meeting, make your request in writing at least 72 hours before the meeting.

- Parent Members may be:
 - A parent of a child currently receiving special education services*
 - A parent of a child declassified within the past five years*
 - A parent of a child who graduated within the past five year*

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Parent Member Additional Resources

A helpful guide called “Special Education 101: Training of the Parent Member” offers more in-depth information on the role, responsibilities, and best practices for Parent Members. You can download it for free and use it as a reference to better understand how a Parent Member supports families through the CPSE/CSE process.

[LINK TO: Special Education 101: Training of the Parent Member](#)

A Parent’s Guide to Special Education in New York State

[This NYS guide](#) explains the special education process, including evaluations, IEPs, parent rights, and the role of the CSE. It’s a clear, parent-friendly resource to help families understand each step and stay informed.

If You Have Questions About the Referral Process

If you do not receive a response to your inquiry within 24 hours, contact the Assistant Director of Special Education assigned to your school. If you continue to have concerns, you may contact the Director of Special Education at (516) 277-7900.

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Contact Chain for Special Education and 504 Questions

IEP (CSE-Specific)

For questions or concerns regarding your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or special education services, please contact the following in order:

1. **Teacher or Case Manager**
2. **Assistant Director of Special Education**
3. **Director of Special Education**
4. **Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction**
5. **Superintendent**

504 (Accommodations, Subject Matter, Teaching, Supplies, and Materials)

For questions about 504 plans, classroom accommodations, or instructional materials, please contact the following in order:

1. **Teacher or Case Manager**
2. **Assistant Director of Special Education**
3. **Director of Special Education**
4. **Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction**
5. **Superintendent**