The Three Prongs

When does a student qualify for special education services? This is the primary question for many educators. With eligibility criteria for any of the categories, students must meet this three prong test. Remember, no one person automatically qualifies for special education and related services. This is why.

Prong 1- Does the child have a diagnosed disability?
After conducting a comprehensive evaluation, the eligibility team will look at the test results and determine under which of the 14 disability categories the student would qualify. The diagnosed disability is based upon the Washington eligibility criteria.

Prong 2- Does the diagnosed disability adversely affect the child's educational performance?
The IEP team needs to determine how the skill areas affected by the disability are impacting the child's educational performance. Functional assessment data would be a source of information the team could use to assist in making this determination. A comparison between the child's current skill levels and the skill levels appropriate for their current age/grade level would be one indication of educational impact. State/district wide assessment data, baseline data etc. are also source for determining educational impact.

Prong 3- Does the child require "specially designed instruction" to receive FAPE?
Even if a child has a diagnosed disability and the skill areas affected by the disability adversely affect the child's education performance, the child must also meet this final prong. The child must require specially designed instruction to benefit from education (i.e. require an IEP). For example, a child may meet the eligibility criteria for visual impairment. Data may indicate that the impairment impacts educational performance. However, with the provision of assistive technology and large print books, the child is able to successfully function in the general curriculum with their peers; therefore, they would not be eligible for special education since they would not require specially designed instruction (IEP).