

<b>Administration Building</b>	2000 Ashbourne Rd., Elkins Park, PA 19027 215-886-9500 Fax: 215-884-3029 Dr. Brian W. Scriven, Superintendent ShaVon Savage, M.S.Ed., J.D., Assistant Superintendent
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## CSD Special Education Parent/Guardian Resource Guide

Contributing Author	Role
Dr. Stephen Catrambone	Director of Special Education
Allison Kuchler	Supervisor of Special Education
Dr. Tracey Lank	Supervisor of Special Education
Jaclyn DiGianivittorio	Supervisor of Special Education
Starlita Johnson	Parent/Guardian /Special Ed. Alliance of Cheltenham
Joycelyn Duncan	Parent/Guardian
Noel Kress	Parent/Guardian
Yvonne Duva Howard	Parent/Guardian
Jatasha Jean	Parent/Guardian
Jennifer Lucas	Parent/Guardian
Joseph Linnett	Parent/Guardian
Megan Canary	Parent/Guardian
Elizabeth Lennox	Parent/Guardian
Lisa Heshbacher	Special Ed. Alliance of Cheltenham
Shantee Crump	Parent/Guardian
Tyshon Bullock	Parent/Guardian
Danielle Spigner	Parent/Guardian
Milia Williams	Parent/Guardian
Talia Hobson	Parent/Guardian
Zikiyya Jones	Parent/Guardian

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## **Purpose and Vision**

This Parent/Guardian guide is part of a working framework that is consistent across schools and aligns with general education programming to guide the instruction and implementation for students (K-12+) receiving special education services in Cheltenham School District and aligns with our mission and vision.

**MISSION:** The mission of Cheltenham School District is to provide inspiration and resources for every student to achieve academic excellence and pursue their highest potential by creating an equitable and inclusive community that fosters social and emotional well-being and a passion for learning.

**VISION:** “Belong, Engage, Seek Justice” Cheltenham School District is a community where all students know they belong, engage and excel in their learning experience, and are prepared to act as champions of social justice.

## **Background**

The work completed during the 2023/2024 school year was done in conjunction with central office, building administrators, teachers, special education teachers, psychologists, related service providers and paraprofessionals. Prior to completion, Parent/Guardians and student focus groups were engaged to solicit feedback on their work, as well as current processes, procedures and materials/programs utilized within our schools.

A total of four committees were formed and met periodically throughout the school year. The primary focus was on our programming for students receiving the following support, according to their IEPs - Learning, Autistic, Life Skills and Emotional Support.

**Learning support** refers to students with a disability who require services primarily in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, or speaking or listening skills related to academic performance.

**Autistic support** refers to students with the disability of autism who require services to address needs primarily in the areas of communication, social skills or behaviors consistent with those of autism spectrum disorders. The IEP for these students must address needs as identified by the team which may include, as appropriate, the verbal and nonverbal communication needs of the child; social interaction skills and proficiencies; the child's response to sensory experiences and changes in the environment, daily routine and schedules; and, the need for positive behavior supports or behavioral interventions.

**Life Skills support** refers to students with a disability who require services primarily in the areas of academic, functional or vocational skills necessary for independent living.

**Emotional support** refers to students with a disability who require services primarily in the areas of social or emotional skills development or functional behavior.

The above list is not intended to be all inclusive as we certainly have students who receive support in other areas as listed here - [PA School Code](#),

## **Collaboration and Communication**

Through Parent/Guardian surveys and focus groups, it is evident that there needs to be an increase in effective collaboration and communication between Parent/Guardians and CSD staff and administration. We recognize that school staff need to partner with Parent/Guardians in order to help our children succeed. Some key components will be:

- CSD staff will acknowledge a Parent/Guardian request/question/concern within 48 hours.
- CSD staff will provide a draft of an IEP at least 3 days prior to each meeting so Parent/Guardians can review and be prepared with questions or clarification needed.
- CSD will highlight major changes in draft IEP for Parent/Guardians
- CSD will highlight and communicate ongoing professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals
- CSD will ensure that ALL staff that work with children with IEPs be provided the necessary information and training required to meet the SDIs contained within the child's IEP.

### **Special Education Basics - Frequently Asked Questions - Taken in part from: [PA-Families](#)**

#### ***Q. Does my child need special education?***

A. As a Parent/Guardian, you know your child better than anyone. Your child may be eligible for special education if your child meets BOTH criteria listed below:

1. Has an intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, a hearing impairment, deafness, a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities and
2. Needs special education, as determined by an evaluation team.

Your child must meet both qualifications in order to be eligible for special education. In Pennsylvania, all children eligible for special education have the right to a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE).

***Q. What are some of the signs I might notice that would cause me to be concerned that my son/daughter may need to be evaluated?***

A. Some of the signs you may notice are listed below:

Consistent problems in getting along with others

Difficulty communicating

Lack of interest or ability in age-appropriate activities

Resistance to change

Difficulty seeing or hearing that interferes with the ability to communicate

Health problems that affect educational performance, including attention problems

Difficulty performing tasks that require reading, writing, or mathematics

Chronic behavior or social problems that affect your child's ability to learn

***Q. How do I get help? Who do I speak to or call?***

A. Your child's school has a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process in place that identifies students who may need interventions or enrichment. This process may or may not lead to an initial evaluation for special education and should include, but is not limited to:

A review of the student's records, including attendance and report cards

A review of the student's vision and hearing

Monitoring your child's progress by using assessments at different times during the school year.

An observation of the student's behavior in the classroom or area in which the student is displaying difficulty

Outside information/reports shared by the Parent/Guardian

You may contact your child's school at any time. Should you feel they may be in need of an evaluation, reach out to the teacher and building principal to schedule a meeting. At this meeting, the school team should provide you with interventions and progress monitoring for your child. Should you feel an evaluation is required, you can do this by writing a letter to your child's teacher, principal, guidance counselor or school psychologist. Within 10 calendar days, you should receive a response from the school in the form of a Notice of Recommended Education Placement (NOREP) agreeing to or denying the request. Or, the school may contact you to request permission to have your child evaluated. You must consent in writing to your child's evaluation. School officials cannot proceed without your written permission.

***Q. Who can I talk to concerning Special Education in my school district?***

A. Each building principal is also aware of the procedure for obtaining special education services. If you have spoken to staff at your child's school and still have concerns, do not hesitate to call the district office at 215-886-9500 and ask for the special education contact person.

***Q. What are the steps for the Special Education process?***

**A. Steps in the Special Education Process**

Child is identified as possibly needing special education and related services.

Child is evaluated.

Eligibility is decided.

Child is found eligible for services.

IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting is scheduled.

IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting is held and the IEP is written.

Services are provided.

Progress is measured and reported to Parent/Guardian s.

IEP (Individualized Education Program) is reviewed.

Child is reevaluated.

***Q. What is an evaluation? Who will perform the evaluation on my child?***

A. The evaluation team will gather information that will be used to determine if your child needs special education and, if so, the types of programs and services needed. Your child may be evaluated by a school psychologist. Other evaluations may include tests by a hearing specialist for a child with a hearing problem, or an evaluation from a doctor for a child with a health concern. The evaluation must also include input from a certified professional if certain services, called “related services,” may be needed. An example is speech therapy (for speech and language) or occupational therapy (for fine motor and other skills).

The evaluation will include information about your child’s skills, strengths, and needs. All evaluations and reevaluations (which are done at 2- or 3-year intervals after the initial evaluation) must include a review of the testing and assessments that were conducted, information from the Parent/Guardian s, classroom observations, and the observations of teachers and related service personnel.

An evaluation team reviews all materials and writes a report called an Evaluation Report (ER) that states if your child has a disability and if your child needs special education.

***Q. What is an Evaluation Report (ER)?***

A. The Evaluation Report (ER) makes recommendations about the types of services your child needs. The ER may state that your child is not eligible and does not need special education services. You will receive a copy of the ER and a written notice stating that you have the right to disagree and may request an independent educational evaluation (IEE) or request a due process hearing. A copy of the ER and a summary of the findings must be given to you.

If your child is being evaluated for a specific learning disability, Parent/Guardian s (as members of the evaluation group) will be given an opportunity to agree or disagree with the results of the ER. You will sign the form indicating if you agree or disagree.

***Q. What is an Independent Evaluation (IEE)? Why would I want to get one for my child?***

A. Sometimes Parent/Guardian s disagree with the recommendations from the school district. You can request that the district pay for an Independent Evaluation (IEE). You must first disagree with the district's evaluation. Then the district can proceed with either agreeing or disagreeing to the IEE (Independent Evaluation) through their process.

***Q. What are my child's rights when it comes to special education?***

A. Under Pennsylvania and federal law, a child with a disability has a right to special education and related services that are provided:

Under public supervision and direction.

Without charge (at public expense) to preschool (ages 3-5), elementary, or secondary school students.

In the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This means that children with disabilities are educated to the maximum extent appropriate with children who do not have disabilities, in the general education class.

In conformity with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This means that students with disabilities who need special education must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) includes other (related) services that help your child get to school and benefit from the special education program. These may include:

Special transportation,

Speech, physical, or occupational therapy,

Psychological counseling,

Other services which help or support your child as your child grows and learns.

**Q. *What is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?***

A. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the nation's federal special education law that ensures public schools serve the educational needs of students with disabilities. IDEA requires that schools provide special education services to eligible students as outlined in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). IDEA also provides very specific requirements to guarantee a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). FAPE and LRE are the protected rights of every eligible child, in all 50 states and U.S. territories.

**Q. What is an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)?**

A. An IEP is an Individualized Education Plan. An IEP must be completed within 30 days after your meeting for the Evaluation Report (ER). An IEP is an individualized plan created just for your child. The IEP creates an opportunity for teachers, Parent/Guardians, school administrators, related services personnel and students (when appropriate) to work together to help your child and meet his/her educational needs. The IEP guides the delivery of special education supports and services for your son or daughter. The IEP must be put in place within 10 days of your IEP meeting.

**Q. Who would I (or must) expect to be on my child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team?**

A. The IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team includes yourself, any support you may bring (family, advocate, friend) teachers, administrators, and related service providers. Each person's information adds to the team's understanding of what your child needs. Everyone's perspective is important. If a mandated member is excused and his/her subject area or specialty is being discussed, he/she must provide written input before the meeting. If you choose not to attend the IEP meeting, it may be held without you. The youth must be invited to the meeting if her postsecondary goals and transition needs will be discussed at the meeting (This is required if the child will turn 14 during the next school year.) If transition needs are not going to be discussed, then it is up to the Parent/Guardian to decide whether the child should attend the meeting.

***Q. What are some of the items that my child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) might contain...say about or do to help my child?***

A. The IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team will review all the evaluation material and determine how your child is currently performing in school. The IEP team will write measurable, annual goals designed to meet the needs of your child.

The IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team will determine:

The types of special education support and services to be provided to your child that will be used to meet the individual needs of your child.

The date services and programs will begin and how long they will last.

The tests or other methods of evaluation that will be used to measure whether your child is meeting the annual goals and how and when this progress will be reported to you. Progress on meeting annual goals must be reported periodically, at least as often as in general education.

The amount of time your child will spend inside the general classroom and how much, if any, your child will not participate in the general class or in the general education curriculum.

The accommodations and modifications and supplementary aids and services in the general education setting, if any, are needed for your child to succeed in a general education class.

Supports that school personnel may need to implement the IEP, such as resource materials, training, or equipment.

***Q. What are the different options my child may have for where the services are delivered? Will my son or daughter be able to stay in their classroom or school?***

A. The law requires that children with disabilities be placed in educational settings that will give them as many opportunities as appropriate to be with students who are not disabled. This is called placing the student in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The special education program is developed completely before the IEP (Individualized Education Plan). The team decides where the child's program will be provided. The IEP team will consider support and services to determine how the program can be delivered in the LRE. By law, the first place the IEP team must consider is the general classroom in the neighborhood school your child would attend if your child did not have a disability (or where his or her siblings would attend). For some children, placement outside of a general education class for some of the day is necessary. Students who receive most of their instruction in basic academic subjects outside of a general education setting will still have opportunities to participate in other activities in school with general education students.

***Q. Will my child be placed in a classroom with his/her peers?***

A. The law requires that students receiving special education be placed in classes with students of the same age range. At the elementary level (grades K–6), a class cannot have children who vary in age by more than three years. At the secondary level (grades 7–12), an age range of no more than four years is allowed. An exception can be made by the IEP team for an individual child, based on the child's needs. It must be justified in the IEP (Individualized Education Plan).

***Q. What is the "continuum of alternative placements?"***

A. The continuum of alternative placements refers to places where children receive special education services. Placements are on a continuum, from least to most restrictive. Your child's placement may be in:

A regular class, with needed supplementary aids and services

A class where all or some students receive special education services all or part of the day.

At Home

In an alternative school, public or private

A hospital, residential facility, partial hospitalization or other specialized setting

Another setting

**Q. What if my child/youth is evaluated and does not qualify for an IEP?**

A. A 504 Plan is a plan that can be considered and developed, if your child meets the criteria, to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment.

**Q. What is the difference between a 504 Plan and an IEP (Individualized Education Program)?**

A. Not all students who have disabilities require specialized instruction. For students with disabilities who do require specialized instruction, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) controls the procedural requirements, and an IEP is developed. The IDEA process is more involved than that of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and requires documentation of measurable growth. For students with disabilities who do not require specialized instruction but need the assurance that they will receive equal access to public education and services, a document is created to outline their specific

accessibility requirements. Students with 504 Plans do not require specialized instruction, but, like the IEP, a 504 Plan should be updated annually to ensure that the student is receiving the most effective accommodations for his/her specific circumstances.

**Q. What is a NOREP...Notice of Recommended Educational Placement?**

A. Once you are finished developing the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) with your child's team you will receive a NOREP (Notice of Recommended Educational Placement). This document will summarize the recommendations for your child's placement, program, and services. You must sign the document indicating if you agree or do not agree to the recommendations for the initial IEP . You will not have to sign this after the initial IEP unless there is a change in the placement for your child.

**Q. What is the Procedural Safeguards booklet they provide at every IEP meeting?**

A. You have a right to be notified of the safeguards that serve to protect the rights of your child. The school must provide Parent/Guardians with a copy of the Procedural Safeguards Notice at least once each school year.

In addition, the law requires Parent/Guardians to be informed and issued a Procedural Safeguards Notice:

At the time of an initial referral or Parent/Guardian request for an evaluation.

When the school proposes to change the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or the provision of a free appropriate public education.

When the school refuses your request to change the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or the provision of a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE).

Which includes the procedures to maintain the privacy of your child's education records. Your child's record will be seen only by those who need to work with

your child. Your school district must show you its policy about student records and confidentiality, if requested. Detailed information on confidentiality will be described in the notice given to you on those instances listed above.

***Q. What is a behavior plan?***

A. When the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team determines that a student's behavior is likely to disrupt learning there must be plan put in place in the IEP that addresses the behavior. Programs to manage or change behavior must be designed using positive approaches to help your child correct or manage the behavior. These approaches do not include punishing, embarrassing, or isolating your child. A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) must be completed before a behavioral plan is developed. An FBA reviews your child's behavior where the problems are occurring and helps to determine what is happening to trigger and reinforce the inappropriate behaviors. The IEP team then outlines steps to take to reduce problem behaviors and replace them with appropriate ones.

***Q. What if I disagree with my child's program and services or think the plan or think my child's rights are being denied? What can I do?***

A. You should first talk to your child's teacher. You might want to visit your child's classroom and observe. You can also request an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting to discuss changing your child's program if you think a change is necessary. You may request an IEP team meeting, or meeting with your child's building administrator or special education supervisor. You can also reach out to the director of special education. Lastly, you can request a mediation session or a due process hearing in order to resolve differences that you may have with school officials regarding your child's education.

***Q. What is prior written notice? When must the school district give me prior written notice?***

A. Prior written notice is written statements the school district must give a Parent/Guardian or guardian to inform them about recommendation(s) relating to the initiation or change in the identification, evaluation, educational placement of the student or the provision of a free appropriate public education FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) to the student. The school district must give the Parent/Guardian or guardian of prior written notice a reasonable time before the district proposes to or refuses to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, educational placement of the student or the provision of FAPE to the student. If a proposed action by the school district requires Parent/Guardian consent, the district must give prior notice at the same time it requests the Parent/Guardian's consent.

Hint: Prior Written Notice: If a Parent/Guardian asks for something to be added or deleted from the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and the school refused or did not do it, then a Prior Written Notice with an explanation as to the reason why the district refused it MUST be issued.

***Q. Can special education students be expelled or suspended from school?***

A. There are special rules that apply to special education students. Refer to the [Educational Law Center Guide to Special Education](#)

Other resources at [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net).

***Q. What is a change in placement?***

A. A change in placement for a student must be made by the team. Parents/Guardians are required members of that team. A student's placement can NOT be changed without the appropriate meeting (i.e. IEP Meeting, Manifestation Determination Hearing).

A suspension of between one (1) and 10 days is not a change in placement, so the school can suspend a child for this length of time without following any special rules. However, remember that the school district must still follow the rules that apply to all children.

Any exclusion from school for more than 10 days in a row is an expulsion and a change in placement.

Suspensions totaling more than 15 school days throughout the year are a change in placement. For example, if a child has already been suspended for five (5) days, and then again for 10 days, the next day of suspension would be a change in placement.

Suspensions totaling between 11-15 days that amount to a "pattern" can also be a "change in placement." To figure out if the child had a "pattern" of suspensions, you should consider if:

1. The child has been suspended for a total of more than 10 days in a school year and another suspension is being proposed;
  2. The child is being suspended for behavior that is "substantially similar" to behavior for which the child has previously been suspended;
  3. The length of each suspension;
  4. The total time the child has been suspended; and
  5. How close together the suspensions have been.
6. A transfer to another educational setting (including an alternative school) for more than 10 school days in a row OR for more than 15 total school days in the school year is also a change in placement.

***Q. My child has an Intellectual Developmental Disability. Can he/she be suspended or expelled from school?***

A. Children with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities (IDD) who attend public school districts and charter schools: Any suspension, expulsion, or transfer to another school of a child with an Intellectual Disability is considered a change in placement – even a one-day suspension.

***Q. Who can speak with and ask questions or get help from?***

A. Special Education ConsultLine

The Bureau of Special Education has established ConsultLine, a toll-free information line for your questions and concerns: 1-800-879-2301. ConsultLine is designed to assist Parent/Guardians and advocates of children with disabilities or children thought to have a disability. If you have questions concerning your child's special education program or the laws relating to the provision of services in your child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan), the special education consultants at ConsultLine may be able to assist you. You

may leave a message, and a consultant will return your call within a reasonable number of business days.

***Q. How often must my child be re-evaluated?***

A. Re-evaluation occurs at least every three years (two years for children with intellectual disabilities). Children who are eligible for special education services must be reevaluated at least once every three (3) years or sooner if necessary. Parent/Guardians can be asked to waive the three-year reevaluation, but Parent/Guardians should think very carefully before doing so. Children with an intellectual disability must be reevaluated at least once every two (2) years.

***Q. Who is considered a Parent/Guardian under the Special education laws?***

A. For the rights provided in special education law to work effectively, every child with a disability (or who is thought to have a disability) must have a "Parent/Guardian" who

can act on her behalf. The law includes several categories of persons in the definition of “Parent/Guardian ”:

A birth or adoptive Parent/Guardian ,

The foster Parent/Guardian ,

A “guardian” who has the authority to act as the child’s Parent/Guardian or who has the authority to make education decisions for the child,

A family member with whom the child lives who is caring for the child (such as a grandParent/Guardian or step-Parent/Guardian ) even if that family member does not have legal custody from a court order, or someone who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare, or

A “Surrogate Parent/Guardian .”

***Q. What if my child lives in a hospital, residential, foster or group home facility?***

A. The school district where the foster home, residential facility, or group home is located is responsible for the child’s regular and special education services. Just like children who live with their Parent/guardians, children in residential facilities have a right to be educated in the “least restrictive” setting that is appropriate for the child, including the local public schools. If the child’s IEP cannot be provided in the local school system, or there is another reason why the child cannot attend the public schools (for example, a court has ordered that the child stay on-site for her education), the local district must still make sure that the child receives all needed special education services. This could include contracting with the local intermediate unit to operate a program for that child on the facility’s ground.

***Q. Can my son or daughter stay in school with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) until they are 21 years of age?***

A. Yes, Children with disabilities have the right to stay in school through the school term in which they turn 21, or until they graduate (whichever comes first). The child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team decides whether he/she should graduate before he/she turns 21 or if he/she should stay in school until age 21. Graduation (the acceptance of a diploma) ends the child's right to attend public school. Graduation is a "change in placement" that requires prior written notice (called a Notice of Recommended Educational Placement/Prior Written Notice) to the Parent/Guardian s, and a chance for the Parent/Guardian s to disagree. If school officials believe the child is ready to graduate, and the Parent/Guardian s disagree, the Parent/Guardian s can challenge the decision through the special education hearing process.

***Q. What is PATTAN and how can I use their assistance?***

A. The mission of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN) is to support the efforts and initiatives of the Bureau, and to build the capacity of local educational agencies to serve students who receive special education services.

***Q. What is the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and what services can they provide for my son/daughter?***

A. OVR provides vocational rehabilitation services to help persons with disabilities prepare for, obtain, or maintain employment. OVR provides services to eligible individuals with disabilities, directly and through a network of approved vendors. Services are provided on an individualized basis. Education to prepare you for a job including, but not limited to, basic academic, vocational/technical, college, on-the-job training, independent living skills, and personal and work adjustment training.

Any high school student with a disability who may need vocational guidance and assistance in preparing for, obtaining, or maintaining competitive employment should be considered for referral to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). Students who have an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), 504 Plan, or who are involved with a school's Student Assistance Program may be appropriate referrals to OVR.

Ideally, students should be referred two years prior to graduation, although referrals can be made earlier when appropriate. Students with a significant visual impairment can be referred to the Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services at any time. Technical assistance may be provided on behalf of students with disabilities with regard to Transition at any age without a formal referral.

A referral to OVR can be made by anyone, including the student, a family member or school/agency personnel. Students under the age of 18 must have Parent/Guardian /guardian permission to become involved with OVR services.

At the time of the initial referral, OVR will need the following information about the student to facilitate the application process:

Student's name

Address

Telephone number

Email address

Date of birth

Social Security Number

Gender

Statement of disability

Pennsylvania Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Services  
<http://www.dli.state.pa.us/>

***Q. What is the Office of Dispute Resolution?***

A. The Office for Dispute Resolution (ODR) provides the resources for Parent/Guardians and educational agencies to resolve educational disputes for children served by the early intervention system, students who are gifted (or thought to be gifted), and students with disabilities (or thought to have disabilities). More information can be found at <http://odr-pa.org/>

Acknowledgments and Adaptations

Some information was adapted or used from the following sources:

1. AccessStem - <http://www.washington.edu/> Permission is granted to copy these materials for educational, non-commercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.
2. PATTAN Family Guide - Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) 800-441-3215 (King of Prussia) [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net) 800-360-7282 (Harrisburg) 800-446-5607 (Pittsburgh)
3. The Right to Education in Pa. Guide for Families and Advocates Education Law Center (Rev. 3/10) (215) 238-6970 (Philadelphia) (412) 258-2120 (Pittsburgh) [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org)
4. National Learning Center for Disabilities <http://www.nclد.org/>

## Resources

Standards-Aligned Instruction - [SAS Portal](#)

Understanding Learning Disabilities - <https://www.ldonline.org/>

Supporting ADHD - <https://chadd.org/>

Foundational Reading - <https://www.readingrockets.org/>

Math - [https://why.pbslearningmedia.org/subjects/mathematics/?rank\\_by=recency](https://why.pbslearningmedia.org/subjects/mathematics/?rank_by=recency)

Special Education Compliance and Law - <https://www.wrightslaw.com/>

Additional Resources found on CSD Website - [Click Here](#)