

Identifying Students for Section 504 Eligibility

ADA Amendments Act

When Congress amended the Americans with Disabilities Act in 2008, the intent was to ensure a broad scope of protections under the ADA and to shift the analysis away from whether the individual had a disability to the district's obligation to ensure equal educational opportunities.

What criteria are used to determine 504 eligibility?

For a student to qualify for Section 504 protection, the student must meet three criteria: **(1) have a mental or physical impairment, (2) which substantially limits, (3) one or more major life activities.** Simply having a condition or disability does not automatically qualify a student for Section 504 protections. The condition must present a barrier to the student's ability to access the same educational opportunities as those afforded a student without disabilities. While there are no disabilities that are automatically eligible for Section 504 protections, Office for Civil Rights ("OCR") has issued guidance that indicates in "virtually every case," diabetes, epilepsy, bipolar disorder, or autism will result in eligibility under Section 504. See Dear Colleague Letter, 112 LRP 3621 (OCR 2012). It is important to understand that all three criteria must be met before the student is eligible for Section 504 protection. Additional detail on each of the three criteria follows.

Mental or physical impairment.

This criterion includes any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more body systems. Mental or psychological disorders are also covered. Section 504, in contrast to IDEA, does not limit eligibility to specific diseases or categories of medical conditions. Environmental, cultural, and economic disadvantages are not covered unless the student who has any of these characteristics also has a physical or mental impairment.

Substantially limits.

Section 504 does not specifically define the term "substantially limits." The basis for evaluating this criterion is the impact the impairment has on one or more of a student's major life activities. A student's impairment is a substantial limitation if the student's "important life activities are restricted as to the conditions, manner, or duration under which they can be performed in comparison to most people." See S. Rep. No. 101-116, at 23 (1989) and Congressional Record, (Sept. 16, 2008), p. S8842. Further, an impairment does not need to prevent or severely or significantly restrict a major life activity to be considered substantially limiting. 29 C.F.R. 1630.2(j)(1)(ii).

The Section 504 Team will consider the nature and severity of the disability as well as how long the disability is expected to last. OCR has indicated that temporary impairments are not a disability under Section 504 unless the severity of the impairment will result in a substantial limitation for an extended period of time. See Frequently Asked Questions about Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities, (OCR 2009). However, an impairment that is episodic or in remission is considered a disability if it would substantially limit a major life activity when it is in an active phase.