Role of the School Nurse: Students with Special Health Care Needs and Disabilities

School nurses provide care and support to all students and are positioned to identify those with special health care needs and disabilities that may be a barrier to learning. In 2022 – 2023, more than 1 in 4 children (26.2%) in the United States had a special health care need (Maternal and Child Health Bureau [MCHB], 2022). Children and Youth with Special Healthcare Needs "are children who have or who are at increased risk for chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally" (Maternal and Child Health Bureau [MCHB], 2022, para. 1). Students with special health care needs may qualify for disability accommodations under Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), (U.S. Department of Education, 2025) or special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) (IDEA Statute). As a member of school multidisciplinary teams, school nurses bridge health and education for students with special health care needs and disabilities by identifying health related barriers to learning, creating plans, and implementing strategies in the school setting to ameliorate these barriers.

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has adopted the framework of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to address the academic and behavioral needs of every student. The effective implementation of a MTSS framework increases the chance that appropriate services are provided to students early and may contribute to determining the need for referral to identify a disability under Section 504 or IDEA. (Exceptional Children's Educational Act §4.02(2)(c)(v).

What is the role of the School Nurse in the MTSS process?

The school nurse is a key informant regarding health issues for every student within the school. The school nurse's role in the MTSS process is to ensure that health issues impacting student learning and behavior are identified, included, and addressed in the framework (Bobo, et al. 2023).

School nurse responsibilities for students with special health care needs

Responsibilities for the school nurse include:

- Assisting in identifying students who may benefit from disability accommodations and special education services
- Evaluating students' needs in collaboration with the school team
- Developing individualized healthcare plans, (IHPs) and emergency action plans, (EAPs) as needed
- Recommending accommodations and modifications to address health-related barriers
- Participating with the interdisciplinary team to develop section 504 accommodation plans and individualized education programs, (IEPs) as needed.
- Training and supervising assistive personnel as allowed by law

- Providing training on health conditions to school staff
- Participating in transition planning
- Evaluating the effectiveness of IHPs, IEPs, and Section 504 accommodation plans

(Shannon & Yonkaitis, 2025a, p. 143)

Students with chronic or significant healthcare needs that require nursing care or special considerations at school should have an IHP to provide a comprehensive and systematic approach to their care, and an EAP to provide school staff with criteria to recognize an emergency and directions to assist the student. The school nurse is the only school professional qualified to develop, implement, and evaluate healthcare plans for students (National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2025).

Students who qualify for special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) receive an individualized education program (IEP) that outlines the instruction and supports they need.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, defines a person with a disability as someone who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment. Students who have a disability under Section 504, are protected from adverse action and must be granted reasonable accommodations to educational programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA, 2004) and the Exceptional Children's Education Act, (ECEA), children with disabilities are those from 3-21 years of age who, by reason of one of the disabling conditions, are unable to receive reasonable educational benefit from general education alone (CO Department of Education. State Board of Education, 2026 p. 5). Schools are obligated to develop an individualized education program for students with disabilities under IDEA.

The school nurse is a critical member of the multidisciplinary team responsible for developing a Section 504 accommodation plan for students who have a disability under Section 504 or an IEP for students who require modifications or specialized education (NASN, 2023).

What assessments should be done by the School Nurse for a Special Education Evaluation?

No specifically mandated assessments are required during the special education evaluation. It is up to the multidisciplinary team to determine which assessments should be done to identify the individual needs for a particular child. All personnel conducting the evaluations should be appropriately licensed and endorsed. The Rules for the Administration of the Exceptional Children's Act further requires that:

"The initial evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to appropriately identify all of the child's special education and related service needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified" (ECEA §44.02(4)). IDEA further states that schools must ensure that, "The child is assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, if appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

What should be included in the IEP?

The school nurse must use their professional judgment to determine whether health related information is relevant to the child's educational program to ensure that all needs are met. The student's health history

should be reviewed and summarized if necessary. The school nurse should also determine what health services are needed during the school day and during school sponsored events. These interventions should be documented in the IEP under Student Needs and Impact of Disability. Interventions are listed as either direct or indirect services (CDE IEP Procedural Guidance).

Pertinent health information should be documented by the school nurse in the present level of achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) and should include any interpretation of results related to the health condition. This summary of pertinent data should include the impact on the student's ability to learn or participate in the educational program. Any nursing or health services should be included in the Student Needs and Impact of Disability (CDE IEP Procedural Guidance).

Best practice indicates that a current hearing and vision screening should be reviewed and referenced during the MTSS process or in a special education initial evaluation. The vision of children in pre-kindergarten and the vision and hearing of all children in kindergarten and the first, second, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth grade are mandated on a yearly basis (C.R.S. § 22-1-116) OR If there are any concerns about vision or hearing (ECEA 4.02(2)(c)(iii)..

Again, there are no mandates in Colorado that specify certain health-related information must or must not be included in a child's IEP. A summary of pertinent health-related information that is inclusive enough to assure that all needs are addressed should be included in the IEP. It is also important for the school nurse to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the health-related components of the IEP with the child, parent(s), and other team members, and make revisions to the plan as needed.

Section 504

Students who are ineligible for services under IDEA may be eligible for 504 accommodations; Section 504 is part of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 that guarantees specific rights in federally funded programs and activities to people who qualify as disabled. The school nurse's role as key informant for health and medical issues remains the same.

Can a student's health information be shared?

Student health and educational records are protected under the principles of confidentiality and privacy of the Health and Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (U. S. Department of Education (2019). The nurse should determine whether school personnel who have access to educational and health plans have a legitimate educational need to know the health information. It is best practice to obtain parent/guardian approval before sharing health information with those individuals. Pertinent health-related information should be inclusive enough to assure that all needs are addressed in the IEP, 504, or other plan. If the student has a healthcare plan (IHP) it should be referenced in the IEP but not attached (Shannon & Yonkaitis, 2025b). Since the IHP may need changes periodically during the year, updates can be done without conducting an IEP meeting. The IEP and the 504 plan are among the very few documents required to be forwarded when a child moves to a new school setting and care should be taken to include adequate information in the document to assure continuity of care in the new setting.

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This CDE Guidance document is meant for clarification, is not legally binding, and is not to be confused with legal advice. This guidance reflects CDE's recommendations, but Administrative Units (AUs) may have developed their own policies or procedures that differ from those described herein. Be sure to refer to your local AU's policies and procedures through the Director of Special Education. If you are seeking legal advice, please contact your legal counsel.