

Functional Skills

A parent writes:

“My son does well in school in terms of using his various skills in class, at recess, and at lunch. But he can’t seem to do the same in our neighborhood, at church, in our community. I want the school to help him generalize his skills outside of school, but they say they are not responsible for this. Is that true?”

No. Parents are sometimes told that the school district is only responsible for what happens during the school day, and that the student’s ability to integrate him or herself into home or community life is solely the responsibility of the parent, perhaps in conjunction with another agency such as the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation or Mental Health. Nothing could be further from the truth. A student’s ability to function independently outside of school is, in fact, the very purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA,) the federal law that governs the provision of special education services to the nation’s eligible schoolchildren. Congress specifically stated this in the very first section of the law, as follows:

34 CFR 300.1 Purposes.

The purposes of this part are--

(a) To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and **independent living;**" (emphasis added.)

The need to ensure that students are prepared to succeed, not only in school but in life after school, was emphasized by Congress when they included in the new IDEA 2004 regulations a requirement that a student’s IEP specifically target *functional*, as well as academic, skills:

34 CFR 300.320 Definition of individualized education program.

(a) General. As used in this part, the term individualized education program or IEP means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with Sec.

300.320 through 300.324, and that must include-

(1) A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and **functional performance** (emphasis added.)

Discussion in the Commentary to the IDEA 2004 regulations leaves no doubt that generalization of skills to the real world (i.e, functional skills) is every bit as important as in-school performance of skills, and school districts are responsible for developing a student’s functional skills.

IDEA ‘04 Commentary: Functional Performance

Many commenters recommended that the regulations include a definition of “functional” as it is used, for example, in “functional performance” in Sec. 300.320(a)(1) and “functional goals” in Sec. 300.320(a)(2)

Discussion: It is not necessary to include a definition of “functional” in these regulations because we believe it is a term that is generally understood to refer to skills or activities that are not considered academic or related to a child's academic achievement.

Instead, “functional” is often used in the context of routine activities of everyday living. We do not believe it is necessary to include examples of functional skills in the regulations because the range of functional skills is as varied as the individual needs of children with disabilities. We also decline to include examples of how functional skills are measured because this is a decision that is best left to public agencies, based on the needs of their children.

Copyright © 2008 Ellen M. Chambers. All rights reserved. SPEDWatch is not engaged in rendering legal, educational, medical, therapeutic, or other professional advice.