

May I Have a Word?

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The Right to Articulation Services in Schools in the Absence of Academic Failure

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I would like to suggest that working on articulation skills is absolutely necessary, educationally relevant, and backed by the United States Department of Education and the law (IDEA regulations).

Many speech/language pathologists are being pressured or prohibited from providing speech (articulation) services to children who either have no academic delays or who are intelligible and present with only single sound errors. This pressure or prohibition is coming from states and/or local agencies that have chosen to narrowly and incorrectly interpret how articulation errors impact "educational performance."

On multiple occasions, ASHA has requested clarification from the U.S. Dept. of Education about this very issue - eligibility for speech services in relation to educational impact or performance. For more than 30 years, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) which is now the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has responded with vivid clarity that *"a child who has a disability cannot be denied service simply because he or she has no concomitant academic problems"* (ASHA website).

Here are a few excerpts from their response letters (dated 1980, 1989, and 2007):

"The extent of a child's mastery of the basic skill of effective oral communication is clearly includable within the standard of 'educational performance' set by the regulations - that is, academic failure is not a prerequisite for services. It remains the Department's position that the term 'educational performance' is not limited to academic performance. Services cannot be denied as a matter of policy because the adverse effect on educational performance is not reflected in grades or academic achievement."

"I agree that an interpretation which denies needed service to speech [or language] impaired children who have no problem in academic performance is unreasonably restrictive in effect and inconsistent with the intent of the Act and regulations."

"The meaning of 'educational performance' cannot be limited to showing of discrepancies in age/grade performance in academic subject-matter areas."

"Any public agency requirements which impose procedures more extensive or stringent than those in the Federal regulations must be scrutinized."

In a nutshell, educational impact is to be interpreted in a broad way based on the functional, developmental, social-emotional, academic, and nonacademic needs of the child, and furthermore, satisfactory academic achievement is not a reason to exclude children from receiving services for articulation disorders.

On ASHA's website, Mr. Stan Dublinske states: "If your state and/or local education agency requires you to show that there is a discrepancy in age/grade performance in academic subject-matter areas before you can determine that a child with a speech or language impairment has a disability and is eligible for special education and related services, they are violating the law." Some suggested actions to be taken are listed at <http://www.asha.org/SLP/schools/prof-consult/adverselyaffects/>

Appropriate eligibility criteria should include factors beyond intelligibility and academic performance, such as percentage of excessive use of substitution or omission errors that are not age-appropriate, greater than 1.51 standard deviations below age level mean scores, articulation errors that are at least 12 months delayed and occur at least 50% of the time in connected speech, and the impact of articulation errors on oral participation in class, on reading/spelling, and other academic standards that include effective communication skills as required.

If we work with or under individuals making misguided recommendations or demands, we must become advocates in addition to clinicians. We advocate for these children by referring co-workers and supervisors to 1) our code of ethics and speech/language guidelines, 2) the policies and regulations set by governing bodies, 3) the law, and 4) common sense that says education is accessed through COMMUNICATION.

Pam Marshalla once said, "If we do not address (articulation) errors, no one will. These bright children are our future leaders. They deserve, no, they need, excellent communication skills. Equal access to special education should include high-functioning children as well as those with more severe issues."

The bottom line is that children with a speech or language impairment have a disorder that adversely affects educational performance.