



**CENTRAL RIVERS**  
AREA EDUCATION AGENCY



**Working Together for Children**  
*A Guide for Parents and Educators*



# Introduction to Problem Solving

The schools within the Central Rivers Area Education Agency (Central Rivers AEA) strive to provide opportunities for all children to be successful. Even so, some children experience difficulties during their school careers. Central Rivers AEA staff members work with teachers and administrators in schools to assist students who are having difficulties. Services are also available to help the parents of these children. Parents are important partners in creating student success. By working together, parents, teachers and Central Rivers AEA staff find solutions for all types of student concerns.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the way services are requested and delivered in Central Rivers AEA area schools when a student is experiencing difficulties. It includes answers to some common questions and addresses some of the day-to-day procedures parents and teachers will experience working within our schools. In order for parents and teachers to be equal participants in solving student problems, they need to be aware of the methods and procedures used. If after reading this you have additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact your school principal, Central Rivers AEA Regional Director or Central Rivers AEA Parent Education Connection Coordinator (PEC).

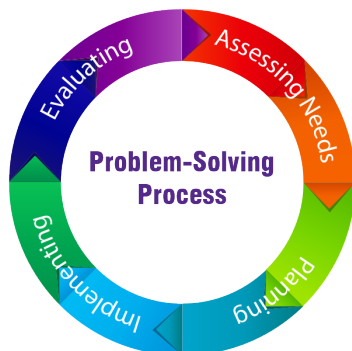
## *Problem-Solving Process*

Schools in Central Rivers AEA use a problem-solving process to meet the needs of students. The problem-solving process assists parents and teachers who need help with educational solutions to problems that arise in schools. The problem-solving process addresses the following questions:

- *Assessing Needs: What is the problem and why is it occurring?*
- *Planning: What are we going to do about the problem?*
- *Implementing: Are we implementing our plan as intended?*
- *Evaluating: Did our plan work as intended?*

In the problem-solving process, student difficulties are specifically defined, possible solutions are determined and strategies are tried in the general education classroom.

The impact is carefully monitored and evaluated to determine if these strategies are successful for the student. The process is applied to all types of student problems at the building, classroom, small group and individual level.



Student needs range along a continuum from mild to severe. Some students need just a few changes to their instruction, and others have more intensive needs that require very specialized instruction. As student needs become more intense, it becomes increasingly more important that the problem-solving process, instructional design and progress monitoring procedures become more rigorous and formalized.

## *Supplemental or Intensive Instruction*

The plan put into place for a student as a result of problem solving is called supplemental or intensive instruction. This instruction includes a planned set of procedures and strategies designed to improve student performance. To develop the instructional plan, the team looks at specific concerns and, based on the assessment data they have at the time, put an action plan in place. The intent of the supplemental or intensive instruction is to reduce the student's difficulty and learn more about what is needed to successfully address the student's needs. Instruction can be provided at different levels of intensity and can involve different team members depending on the type of problem the student is experiencing. Supplemental instruction is usually provided first. It becomes more intensive if the supplemental instruction is not sufficient to meet needs.

## *Ongoing Progress Monitoring*

Perhaps the most critical component of any supplemental or intensive instruction is "monitoring" or keeping track of the difference the instruction is making on a student's performance. This regular, ongoing collection of information about the effect of the instruction is important to the team's decision making as they follow-up. Without the information collected during the supplemental or intensive instruction, it is not possible to determine the effect on student performance.

## *Early Intervention Without Labeling*

In the problem-solving process, it is not necessary to identify with any type of educational label. Instead of spending resources determining a label and matching instruction to that label, specific educational needs are assessed and time is spent determining what type of instruction is successful for that student. The key is to intervene as early as possible before problems arise or become severe.

The impact is carefully monitored and evaluated to determine if these strategies are successful for the student. The process is applied to all types of student problems at the building, classroom, small group and individual level.

# Identifying Students Who Need Problem Solving

Problem solving can begin at any time. Some schools use a referral process. When a student is having difficulty, a teacher or parent refers him/her for problem solving. A team then works together using the problem solving process to address his/her needs. This is called an individual approach to problem solving. Other schools periodically assess all students in areas like reading, math or behavior to identify those students who need supplemental or intensive instruction. The process is then used to address the needs of all groups of students who may be having problems or are at-risk. This is called a school-wide approach to problem solving.

No matter how the student is identified for problem solving, appropriate strategies are selected and progress is monitored frequently to ensure the student is making adequate growth. Since progress is monitored regularly, the student can move in and out of various instructional plans depending on his/her needs and progress.

## Individual Approach to Problem Solving

When an individual approach to problem solving is used, a parent or teacher refers the student to a team. The resources used to address the problem should match the severity of the problem. As the severity of the problem increases, the need for more rigorous intervention and monitoring increases. Typical levels of problem solving include:

- **Classroom Level**

Student concerns are addressed by the parent and teacher working together with no additional resources. Problem solving at this level occurs in schools every day.

- **Building Level**

There are times when additional building staff or resources are needed to address student concerns. Many schools have teams of teachers, sometimes called Building Assistance Teams (BATs), grade level problem solving teams or Building Leadership Teams (BLTs) who support teachers and parents as they address student problems.

At this level, teachers will use more specific strategies to solve the problem and will keep close track of the results of their efforts.

- **Advanced Level**

Many problems are solved using classroom and building level resources (general education resources). If individual students are not making sufficient progress, someone on the team (teacher, principal or parent) may begin to suspect the student has a disability. If so, the parent, general education teacher, an LEA representative (usually the principal) and a Central Rivers AEA team member will participate in a process to determine if a disability is suspected. The team

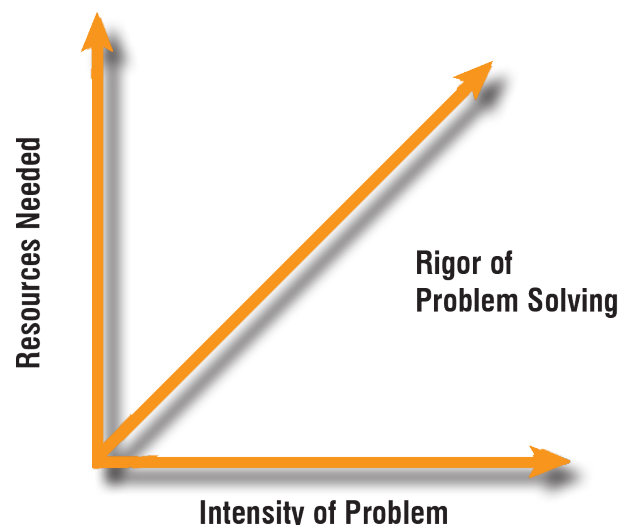
will examine data to determine if there is reason to suspect a disability.

If there is suspicion of a disability, the parent will be asked to sign consent for a full and individual evaluation because at this time the problem requires more specialized assessment and input. If more data regarding the student's progress and response to instruction is needed, intensive instruction may be put into place while the evaluation is being conducted. The planning, documentation and data collection at this level is very specific. Central Rivers AEA staff are primarily responsible for directing activities at this level.

The result of the evaluation may indicate that general education instruction will continue to be appropriate to meet student needs or that special education services will be required. In some cases, the results may indicate that the student is eligible for special education. Parent consent for placement in special education will be sought and problem solving and planning will be documented in an individualized education plan that will be developed for the student.

**It is important to know that the vast majority of students who receive problem solving are never considered for special education. The purpose of problem solving is not to identify students for special programs or services but to find the strategies that will best meet their needs and accelerate growth and development in the area of concern.**

*Note: It is not necessary for a student to progress through all levels of problem solving. Instead the student should always be at the level that provides the resources to address the need. The rigor of problem solving should match the intensity of the problem and the resources needed to address the problem. This concept is illustrated in the diagram below.*



## *Planning for Immediate Needs*

There will be occasions, such as if a student has a medical condition, when students experience difficulty so significant in nature that a request will be made (by parents, school, etc.) for an evaluation when little to no problem solving has occurred. The team will determine if a disability is suspected in any area. In these circumstances, parents will be requested to sign permission for the evaluation to take place. Intensive instruction will begin while the evaluation is being conducted.

In crisis situations, parents should contact the Central Rivers AEA support staff serving their child's school, the school principal or their district's Central Rivers AEA Regional Director immediately. This will allow for an early and timely response. These individuals will assure that concerns are addressed as quickly as possible and student needs are met.

- (1) defining the problem
- (2) developing a plan
- (3) implementing the plan
- (4) evaluating the effects will occur

## *Advanced Problem Solving*

If student needs become more intense, it becomes increasingly more important that the problem-solving process, instructional design and progress monitoring procedures become more rigorous and formalized. Again, at this time a disability may be suspected. The process described in the previous section of suspecting disability, evaluating and determining eligibility is followed. A Central Rivers AEA staff member will be involved in supporting problem solving for students once a disability is suspected.

## **School-Wide Approach to Problem Solving: Instructional Decision Making**

In Iowa, when problem solving is implemented on a school-wide basis, it is called Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). MTSS offers a school-wide framework for problem solving to meet the needs of all students. Universal screening assessments are given to all students, and those students identified as at risk or needing more instructional support are provided with additional teaching and practice. If needed, these students are given further assessments to determine the nature of their needs. Students are then matched to appropriate instructional strategies and educator support.

For students who need additional instruction, the interventions are provided in addition to the building's universal (regular) instruction for the academic domain (e.g. reading, math, writing, behavior). This targeted instruction is usually provided in small groups and is more specific with opportunities for practice and feedback. If targeted instruction is not sufficient or if the student's needs are very severe, intensive instruction may be needed. Problem solving about the individual needs of a student who needs intensive instruction is provided before the instruction occurs. This might require additional assessment. Intensive instruction is individualized and will be more specifically targeted.

Through the ongoing process of assessing, instructing and monitoring, student needs are matched to appropriate strategies. Progress is monitored frequently to ensure students are making adequate growth. Since progress is monitored regularly, students can move in and out of instructional groups depending on their needs and progress. At every level of intervention—universal, targeted or intensive instruction—the problem solving steps of





# Parent Role in Problem Solving

The role of parents in the problem-solving process is essential. Parents should not only be informed of every step of the process, they should be invited to participate and contribute their ideas and suggestions based upon their unique understanding of the needs of their child. In an individual approach, the parents should be part of the team working with the initial referral and in all problem-solving activities about their child. In a school where a school-wide approach is being used, parents should be informed about the activities and supports within the school that are available to all students. If their child is identified as in need of supplemental or intensive instruction, progress is reviewed regularly with parents. If the supplemental or intensive instructional plan needs to be individualized for their child, parents should be included in the planning of that individualization. It is always beneficial for the child when the school, Central Rivers AEA staff and parents work collaboratively through the problem-solving process.

## *Parent Consent*

Entitlement for special education is not the purpose of the process, but in some circumstances, the data collected during the process will indicate that a disability may be suspected. Parents, an LEA representative, an AEA representative and a general education teacher will participate in a decision making process to plan a Full and Individual Evaluation. The team will consider each of the following domains and examine the evidence to see if disability should be suspected.

- Academic
- Adaptive Behavior
- Behavior
- Physical
- Health
- Hearing
- Vision
- Communication

It is important to remember that the information generated during the problem-solving process is invaluable when making the determination of eligibility for a specific student. Not only does it serve to provide the student with an intervention that is matched to his/her specific educational need, but without this information, determining a student's eligibility for special education services is virtually impossible.

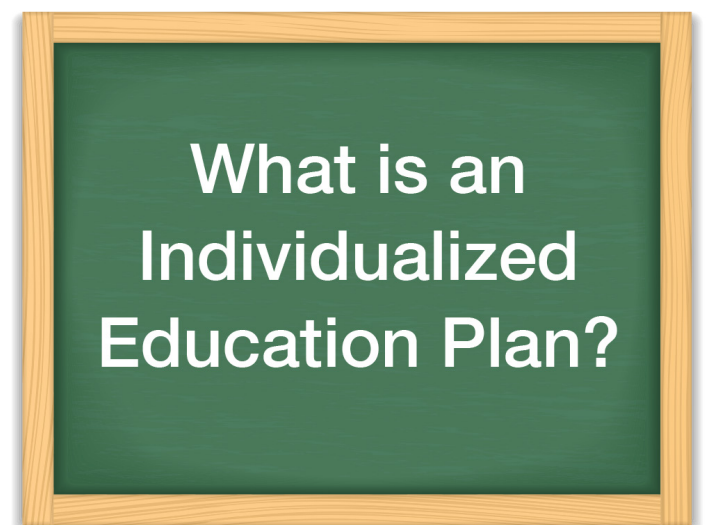
## *Parent Request for Evaluation*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) clearly states that the parent of a child having problems in school can request an evaluation at any time to determine if their child has a disability and needs special education services. When parents request an evaluation of their child, the team will gather to examine the evidence and consider suspicion of disability in each of the areas listed above. If evidence exists indicating that there is not a disability in any of the above domains, they will receive a written refusal to conduct the evaluation. If there is not this type of evidence for any domain area, the parent will be asked to sign consent and an evaluation will be conducted.

# Special Education

If special education services are a consideration for a student, determining eligibility involves the examination of three considerations: (1) the student's rate of progress in the area(s) of concern, (2) the student's discrepancy from peers in the area(s) of concern and (3) the educational needs of the student in the area(s) of concern.

All students who receive special education services will have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a written document that serves as a guarantee to provide the needed services identified in a child's evaluation. Parents and teachers are expected to participate in the development and revision of a child's IEP. Additionally, if the IEP team determines a child is entitled to special education services, parents must provide signed consent in order for the school to provide those services.



## *The Individualized Education Plan*

When a child is initially staffed for special education services and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is written, parents and teachers should have a very clear understanding of what a student will be working on, what special services will be provided, who will provide those services and where any services will be provided. In addition, any accommodations or modifications required for the student should be clearly described.

Parents of a child requiring special education services should expect that their child's IEP is reviewed at least annually and that progress is monitored regularly as stated in the IEP. Parents should expect to receive a progress report describing the student's progress as frequently as they receive the regular school report card.

Students who continue to demonstrate they are eligible for special education services will receive those services until they reach the maximum age of eligibility or graduate from school. All students in special education have reviews of their program at least once each year and are reevaluated every three years if not before. Parents may request a meeting about their child's program at any time.

## *Exiting Special Education*

The decision to place a student into a special education program is an important one and one that should not be taken lightly. An important topic to discuss at IEP meetings is potential exit from special education services. The purpose of special education services is to provide curricular and instructional opportunities for the student that will enable them to overcome their learning difficulties and progress to the maximum extent possible. With this in mind, parents should always ask how their student is progressing and when will they no longer need special education services.

Exit decisions should be considered at every IEP meeting. Sometimes students will have progressed to a point in which they can be considered for general education programs without support. For other students, receiving less support from special education is warranted and needs to be considered. Once students have gained skills that allow them to receive and benefit from the general education program, they need to be reintegrated or exited from special education programming so they maintain contact with peers, do not become overly-dependent and are exposed, to the maximum extent possible, to the same learning environment of regular education students.

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# Ensuring Success By Working Together

Everyone strives for student success. As parents, teachers and Heartland AEA staff work together, it will be critical that we communicate our concerns openly and without reservation. By working collaboratively with one another, we can provide the best possible opportunities for our children and youth while assuring that difficulties are resolved in an effective and efficient manner. If concerns arise, contact your child's teacher, school principal, Central Rivers AEA Regional Director or Central Rivers AEA Parent & Educator Connection Coordinator.



# Commonly Asked Questions

## *How long should targeted or intensive instruction be provided before suspecting a disability?*

This is perhaps the most common question asked in using the problem-solving approach. Unfortunately, there is no set answer. Some children respond very quickly to targeted or intensive instruction. As a rule, data collection and evaluation are important in determining the length of instruction. By following the problem-solving approach, everyone involved is given the opportunity to share their concerns with the other members of the problem-solving team. In short, instruction should be provided as long as the team feels it is effective. This length will differ in each case, based on the individual needs and problems exhibited by each child. Some problems will naturally take longer to determine if the instruction will make the needed improvements. Throughout the process it is critical to use the information collected to make instructional decisions so that changes in instruction are made when appropriate. It is important to remember that targeted or intensive instruction is not required to suspect a disability, but the data from this instruction is needed to determine eligibility for special education. Because of this, if targeted and intensive instruction has not been provided prior to a Full and Individual Evaluation, it will be provided while the evaluation is being conducted.

## *My child's teacher called today and invited me to a meeting to consider whether or not they suspect my child has a disability. Shouldn't they have gotten my permission before they assessed for special education?*

At this point no assessment for special education has been conducted. You are being invited to a meeting where you will be part of a team making a decision as to whether or not a disability is suspected. The other members of the team will be your child's general education teacher, the principal or his/her designee, and a representative from Central Rivers AEA. The representative from Central Rivers AEA is likely someone with expertise in your child's area of concern. At this meeting you and the team will be looking at information in the areas of academics, behavior, physical, health, hearing, vision, adaptive behavior and communication to determine if there is sufficient evidence to suspect a disability and if so, which areas should be assessed. If the team decides a disability is suspected, you will be asked to give your consent in writing for an evaluation to be conducted. Within 60 days you will meet again

to determine if your child is eligible for special education. (Note: The team is not required to hold a meeting to consider suspicion of disability.)

## *I want my child to receive special education services, but I don't want to go through this problem-solving approach. What do I do?*

By law, parents may request a "full and individual evaluation" for their child at any time during the problem-solving process. If you want to request an evaluation, contact your child's principal. You will then be part of a team and a process to determine if there is sufficient information to suspect a disability. If there is, you will be asked to give consent for an evaluation and the evaluation will be conducted within 60 days. If the information provided to the team indicates there is not a disability suspected, you will receive a summary of this information in a written notice refusing the request to conduct an evaluation.

## *My child's private psychologist did testing and said that my child has a learning disability. What does this mean for my child at school?*

With the proper consent for release of information, the problem-solving team will review the private psychologist's report. It is likely that the school will have a meeting with you to determine if a disability is suspected. A private psychologist's report will not be used to automatically place a child in special education, but it will definitely be considered as the team reviews information to determine if a disability is suspected. If there is sufficient information to suspect a disability, an evaluation to consider special education will be conducted. It is important to note that just because a disability is suspected and an evaluation conducted, it does not mean that a child will be placed in special education. Students in schools are provided special education services based on the Iowa eligibility criteria, while students who see private psychologists may be classified based on very different criteria. In order to qualify for special education services, the student must have a disability and show a significant discrepancy from peer performance as well as show that they have an educational need for special education services. Diagnoses from outside agencies provide valuable information for the team, but do not determine eligibility for special education. Rather, it will be used as one piece of information in making decisions concerning the child's instructional needs.



*I don't want my child in special education, so I don't want to do problem solving, even though my child is having a hard time at school.*

The purpose of problem solving is to meet children's academic and behavior needs. This begins before special education is even a consideration. Most problem solving cases do not result in special education; instead a solution to their educational needs is discovered. That said, agreeing to problem solving does not mean a parent has agreed to special education. Parents must give permission for their child to be evaluated for special education determination, AND they must give permission in order for their child to receive special education services.

*A child who is displaying very aggressive behavior moved into my class. I need help. Do I need to start at classroom level of problem solving?*

No. Parents should be informed first in cases of children with severe behaviors. However, the building level problem solving team could then meet immediately to assist the classroom teacher in designing targeted or intensive instruction to address these aggressive behaviors. In some severe situations, the team may choose to involve Heartland AEA staff and meet to determine whether or not a disability is suspected.

*A child in my class speaks Spanish at home but English at school. The student is not learning to read very well. What will happen to the student?*

Problem-solving procedures focus on resolving a child's difficulties and apply to all types of problems. To understand how best to help an English Language Learner, information is collected from teachers, parents and others who best know the child. This information is used to determine how best to assist the child. Student progress is measured frequently to determine what is most effective for each student, and data-based decisions are made based on the results of that individual child's performance. Research shows that English Language Learner students need several years of structured support in order to become proficient in English and be independently successful at school. That said, there are English Language Learners who have individual needs that may require special education. The problem-solving team will need to determine the impact of language acquisition to determine the student's ongoing needs.

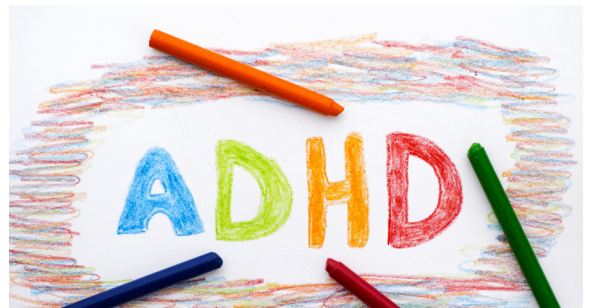
*My student receives academic assistance through special education. The IEP team identified him/her as an "entitled individual" and did curriculum-based assessments, but I need a label and an "IQ" test for government assistance. What can Central Rivers AEA staff do for me?*

Central Rivers AEA staff will always help with requests for information by gathering a child's existing educational information. However, they may not always have the information the outside agency is requesting. Central Rivers AEA, as an intermediate educational unit, is responsible for providing educational assessments for the purpose of instructional planning, intervention and progress monitoring. Collecting assessment data for educational decisions for all children is our responsibility. New assessment information will be generated only if there is a need to answer educationally- related questions or for educational decision-making.

Central Rivers AEA employs the problem-solving approach to design, implement and monitor interventions so many of the tests used to make clinical or medical determinations are rarely, if ever, used. Central Rivers AEA staff does not conduct evaluations to determine eligibility for other agencies.

*A student in my classroom has been diagnosed by a physician as having "ADHD" and is taking medication. Shouldn't the student be in special education?*

Not necessarily. Federal rules and regulations require the provision of health services for students who have health needs that interfere with learning. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may be considered a special health need under some circumstances, but other things need to be considered as well. Although a child has special health needs, educational modifications are not always required. Accommodations may be all that is needed for educational success. The school nurse will be an integral part in the planning and execution of special health services in the school setting and should be included as part of this problem- solving team.





While many students with ADHD may have their needs met through accommodations and supplemental instruction, there may be students who need more specific services. In these cases the team will meet to review all data including the physician's diagnosis and any other health records to determine if a disability is suspected and whether or not an evaluation for special education is warranted.

### *What other rights do I have as a parent?*

If a student is being evaluated for special education services, parents have specific rights. These rights are detailed in the Parent's Rights brochure that is given to parents when written consent is obtained to evaluate for entitlement to special education services. The child's principal, a member of the Central Rivers AEA team or a special education teacher in the school have access to these brochures if you need another one. If you have general questions, always feel free to contact the principal, a Central Rivers AEA staff member or the Central Rivers AEA Regional Director for your area.

### *How long will my child be in special education? How will I know when it is time for services to be discontinued?*

It is hard to know how long a child will need special education services, but it is an important question to ask. The IEP should be developed to provide a child with specialized instruction that will result in improved performance. A child's progress will be monitored, and parents should be able to get information from the special education teacher about three aspects of their progress: (1) how the child's performance compares to other peers in general education, (2) how much progress the child has made since starting the program and (3) how independently the child can demonstrate needed skills.

When the team determines that sufficient progress has been made, it is time to consider reducing special services for your child, deleting goals or possibly exiting your child from special education. There should be a discussion of your student's progress, plans for reintegration into general education activities and steps toward exiting from special education at each IEP meeting. If the child is not making progress toward his/her goals, it is critical that the parents request an IEP meeting to discuss and possibly revise the current plan in an effort to maintain positive progress for the child.





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