

# Chapter 11

## Fostering Strengths and Supporting the Needs of Students With Disabilities

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### ABSTRACT

*Students with disabilities often are not adequately served in schools, resulting in academic achievement gaps as well as poorer college and career outcomes compared to their peers without disabilities. Nearly 14% of students in public K-12 schools have diagnosed disabilities and receive services and accommodations either through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. School counselors are responsible for addressing the academic, career, and social-emotional needs of every student in their school, yet research consistently suggests many school counselors do not feel prepared or confident to address the needs of students with disabilities. This chapter is designed to provide an overview of the unique strengths and needs of students with disabilities, as well as a framework for conceptualizing counseling interventions. The importance of collaboration, leadership, and advocacy are discussed, as are ethical and professional development recommendations.*

### INTRODUCTION

School counselors are charged with addressing the academic, career, and social-emotional needs of every student in their school (American School Counselor Association, 2016a); yet research consistently suggests many school counselors do not feel prepared or confident to address the needs of students with disabilities (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). This chapter offers an opportunity for school counselors to increase their knowledge about students with disabilities. The main objectives of this chapter are to review the unique strengths and needs of students with disabilities, provide a framework for conceptualizing

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counseling interventions, and demonstrate how advocacy skills can be used to support students with disabilities. The chapter starts, however, with a brief overview of **disability** legislation and a summary of the types of disabilities supported by that legislation.

## BACKGROUND

Federal legislation that was passed nearly 50 years ago drastically impacted the work of school counselors. In combination, the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142, which was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] in 1990), led to increasing numbers of students with disabilities attending and receiving specialized supports in public schools. Currently, an estimated 14% of students have diagnosed disabilities and receive services and accommodations typically outlined either through an **Individualized Education Program** (IEP) developed as part of requirements under IDEA, or through a **504 plan** that corresponds to Section 504 (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Guaranteeing a free, appropriate public education to students with disabilities, IDEA provides funding to schools to support the provision of educational accommodations and related services (including counseling). It also has provisions regarding assessment and intervention to facilitate post-secondary transitions (i.e., to work, college, or independent living). In contrast, Section 504 is a civil rights law designed to prevent discrimination – it ensures students with disabilities receive education comparable to their peers without disabilities.

Currently, the IDEA supports the provision of services for students who fall under 13 **disability** categories: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual **disability**, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning **disability**, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment, including blindness. The “other health impairment” category includes conditions that might create what IDEA [§300.8(c)(9)] describes as a limited or a heightened level of alertness affecting their ability to engage in the educational environment, and that negatively affect educational performance. Conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), epilepsy, and asthma could fall into this category. For example, a student suffering an epileptic seizure could have immediate and long-term disruptions to their learning. Each of those conditions also might meet eligibility criteria under Section 504.

Section 504 offers a broad definition of **disability**, and students who have a condition that negatively affects a major life activity, including educational activities such as learning, concentrating, and reading, could become eligible for services. Further, students who have hidden disabilities, or conditions that are not readily apparent, often receive services under Section 504. This is where chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, or depression that might not be present all the time or obvious to others, can severely disrupt a student’s ability to attend school or concentrate. Also, students who have a diagnosis of ADHD might be eligible to receive services under Section 504.

Although eligibility criteria for special education services typically include specific physical and mental health diagnoses, it is important to remember that no two students with a **disability** are alike. Labels in and of themselves can be problematic, often preventing professionals from viewing students as distinct individuals. That is, students possessing the same diagnosis or who are classified in the same category of **disability** might possess similar characteristics, but the way in which their **disability** manifests itself might differ - resulting in varying strengths and **functional limitations**. For that reason, and consistent

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