

Medical Diagnosis vs. Educational Eligibility

The goal of a school-based evaluation team is to determine a student's eligibility for special education services under the *Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE)* criteria, not to provide a clinical diagnosis of the disorder. However, there is often confusion between clinical diagnoses of ASD and ASD special education eligibility criteria. The confusion is further exacerbated when a child receives a clinical diagnosis of ASD but then does not meet the school eligibility criteria under ASD. As such, it is important to outline the differences in the process and purpose of evaluations as well as the criteria to make the decision between the two in order to enhance understanding across school personnel, clinical staff, and families. Below is a brief comparison of the various components of evaluation across the school and clinical models:

	School-Based Eligibility	Clinical / Medical Diagnosis
Purpose/ Function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine special education eligibility • Determine educational impact • Determine need for specially designed instruction • Inform IEP and special education services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Behavioral Health Diagnosis • Determine insurance or Medicaid Autism benefit eligibility • Access non-educational agency services • Dictate medical/clinical treatment
Criteria/Tools to Make Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MARSE ASD Criteria • Use of tools individually determined based on what questions need to be answered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) • Clinical diagnostic assessment tools (e.g. ADOS (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule))
Required Team Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multidisciplinary team including a psychologist/psychiatrist, provider of speech and language, and school social worker 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioners can make independent diagnostic decisions
Plan for Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Existing Evaluation Data (REED) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No evaluation plan requirement
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally includes multiple observations in multiple environments over time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally includes observations in an office or clinic setting

Because the process and purpose for evaluations as well as the criteria used to make the determination are different, a clinical diagnosis of ASD is not required or sufficient for the determination of special education eligibility. A student can have a diagnosis and ASD and not meet the educational eligibility criteria for ASD and vice versa. It is important to note as well that school eligibility does not just require evidence of the disability to be eligible for services but also evidence that the disability impacts educational performance (e.g. academic, behavioral, social) to the point of requiring special education services. As such, if clinical diagnostic information is available, it must be considered in the school evaluation process, but the final determination of eligibility will still require additional school-based assessments and observations.

Reference Source: START (Statewide Autism Resources and Training) Project of Grand Valley, Michigan