

Some mistakes independent evaluators should try to avoid:

- (1) Failing to assess the student's testing performance in the larger context of his/her educational history, family situation, school setting, psychological make-up and other factors. An evaluation can only provide a snapshot of a student in any event. A report that only describes current test scores explains nothing and provides little foundation for the evaluator's recommendations.
- (2) Not contacting the student's teacher(s), special education administrator, or other school personnel involved with the student as key sources of information in the evaluation. Evaluators should not simply assume that the parents' perceptions are more accurate than the school's; sometimes the evaluator's most important role is to reassure parents that their child's public school program is essentially sound.
- (3) Writing reports that are poorly organized, full of jargon, carelessly proofread, or in which the recommendations do not connect logically to the testing results; using boilerplate recommendations that are obviously not specifically geared to the student and his/her particular circumstances.
- (5) Limiting program and service recommendations only to those the evaluator knows are available in the student's particular school system and/or taking the potential cost of providing recommended services into account. Worse, failing to make any educational recommendations at all on the misguided premise that only school employees can decide how to meet identified needs. Special education law entitles the student to services that will enable him/her to make meaningful educational progress. The evaluator's job is to recommend appropriate services, not to limit recommendations to those that are convenient or less costly for school systems.
- (6) Failing to consider and report on the likely risks for a student if recommendations are not implemented.
- (7) Not clarifying for parents that there is often a real difference between recommendations that are clinically desirable and recommendations that are legally mandated (e.g., the best educational program for Johnny may be at an alternative school that will cater to his specific needs, but the public school program, which offers less intensive special education services in the "least restrictive" setting may be all that the law entitles Johnny to)..
- (8) Refusing to leave the citadel: - not following through after the report is written: e.g., not attending team meetings, observing programs and/or testifying when those activities are necessary to ensure that the evaluator's recommendations will be understood, accepted and implemented. (We have seen many due process decisions in which experts' testimony is dismissed because there was no observation of the school district's proposed program or genuine effort to understand that program's structure and services.)
- (9) Working exclusively as a parents' or as a school system's evaluator; this is a sure way to lose credibility as an evaluator over time.
- (10) Not referring parents to a competent special education attorney or advocate to evaluate and advocate for their legal rights.