

FAIR FUTURES PROGRAM MANUAL

SECTION 5

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PART 2: FAIR FUTURES MIDDLE SCHOOL MODEL

In middle school, all students should receive educational advocacy and individualized assistance with the high school selection process from a **Middle School Educational Specialist**. Students should also have access **to in-home, weekly tutoring**, if needed, and connections to extracurricular activities.

To summarize:



Middle School Education Specialist:

A Middle School Education Specialist works with up to 50 students at a time (including younger or older students, if there are less than 50 middle school students at any given agency). See [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 5](#) for a detailed list of responsibilities.



In-home Tutoring:

From 6th to 8th grade, students in need should receive weekly, in-home tutoring from a Tutor Coach (at a 1:15-18 ratio) who works from a strength-based, youth development lens and provides the individualized academic and social-emotional support students need to prepare for high school.

The Tutor Coach should report academic progress, needs, and concerns to the Middle School Education Specialist, and also work with the Specialist to help ensure young people are connected to extracurricular activities.

To implement the tutoring component, agencies can sub-contract a quality third party tutoring provider or build their own tutoring program, ideally with training and technical assistance from a quality tutor provider. See [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 6](#) for more information.

SECTION 5. MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION SPECIALIST



This section summarizes the role of the Middle School Education Specialist. However, the Middle School Education Specialist should also review the K-12 Educational Advocacy Manual by Advocates for Children to receive more detailed guidance on how to advocate for students in certain areas.

See [Appendix F1_K-12 Educational Advocacy Manual](#).

A. OVERVIEW OF ROLE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION SPECIALIST

AT A HIGH LEVEL, ROLE OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION SPECIALIST IS TO:

- Monitor the academic performance of all students in middle school. The Middle School Education Specialist can use the Online Platform to record progress and create automated reports.
- Work with up to 50 middle school students and their families and Case Planners, providing educational advocacy and ensuring students are receiving the supports/services they need to succeed in school. The Middle School Education Specialist can use the Online Platform to check off Steps as they are taken and record progress notes.
- Refer all students in need to quality tutoring and follow up with tutors regarding the student's performance, needs, and any concerns.
- Provide individualized assistance with the high school selection processes to 8th grade students and their families. The Middle School Education Specialist will ensure that all students apply to quality, best-fit schools, and enter these schools into the Online Platform once they are submitted.
 - When possible, the Middle School Education Specialist should provide individualized assistance to all 5th grade students with the middle school selection process as well. *(This will depend on the total number of 5th and 8th grade students at each agency – smaller agencies should be able to assist both cohorts.)*
- Connect students to afterschool and summer extracurricular activities.

Common educational advocacy services provided by the Middle School Education Specialist include:

- **Special education support and advocacy**, including requesting that the school make a referral for evaluations, participating in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, monitoring service implementation, and helping families exercise their due process rights;
- **Disciplinary support and advocacy**;
- **Truancy prevention and support**;
- **Tutoring referrals**;
- **School enrollment and transfers**, including attending best interest determinations and securing transportation when students enter foster care or move between foster care placements;
- **Referrals to other services/supports**, as needed.

B. KEY QUALITIES/COMPETENCIES

They are tenacious advocates.

They are strong communicators.

It is vital that the Middle School Education Specialist build consensus among parties to best advocate for a student.

They are independent.

The Middle School Education Specialist needs to be able to take initiative and make judgment calls without a supervisor present. After applying an intervention, the Specialist should be able to self-assess and figure out what went well and what could have gone better.

They are resourceful.

Often, there is no single obvious answer to a challenge that a student faces. The best Specialist develops a deep knowledge of New York City's educational resources, policies, and best practices, and deploys this knowledge to the benefit of their students. When they do not know something, they look it up or ask someone who does. They are always looking for new programs and opportunities for the students they serve.

See [Appendix A_Fair Futures Screening and Hiring Toolkit](#) for additional tips and best practices in hiring and screening Middle School Education Specialists and for a full job description.

C. COORDINATING WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Collaborating with stakeholders allows the Middle School Education Specialist to create a team of support and advocacy for students.

PARENTS/FOSTER PARENTS

It is imperative to engage the student and their family, including both parents and foster parents, as these are the people that will benefit most from the advocacy.

Parents, who maintain their parental rights have the right to be included in educational planning for their children, should be invited to school events, and their consent is required for many special education decisions. It is the responsibility of the Middle School Education Specialist to contact parents for discussion about issues such as special education services, attendance concerns, behavioral issues in school, and school transfers.

Foster Parents are another group of stakeholders that the Middle School Education Specialist should engage with. As the current caregiver for students, they often have first line information about students' attendance and progress in schools. Foster parents should be attending parent/teacher conferences, as well as receiving notification letters from the school regarding attendance concerns, suspension hearings, promotion in doubt letters, and a wealth of additional information.

It is important for the Middle School Education Specialist to include foster parents in educational planning because they will often interact with school staff on a regular basis.

In cases where parents' rights have been terminated or their whereabouts are unknown, foster parents typically act as the point person when planning for the student's education, and their consent will be needed for special education evaluations and services.

COORDINATING WITH CASE PLANNERS

In addition to direct work with students and families, the Middle School Education Specialist should coordinate with Case Planners on the student's academic progress and follow up on any needs/concerns.

All students in care have a Case Planner who is responsible for supporting them throughout their time in foster care. Case Planners work with children, parents, and foster parents to ensure that children are placed in safe homes and ultimately either return to live with their parents or are adopted/secure an alternative permanent placement. Case Planners do everything from scheduling parent and sibling visits and conducting home visits to making sure everything is going well with a child's foster home placement and attending family court hearings.

Case Planners are also required to communicate with the school at least once per service review period regarding a student's progress and conduct best interest determinations regarding school placements. Since Case Planners communicate regularly with students and their foster parents/parents, they are usually the best point of contact for getting up-to-date information about students' living situations, if needed.

The Middle School Education Specialist should also be in touch with any concerns that arise and make themselves available to assist with any educational questions that the Case Planners may have.

The Middle School Education Specialist should provide a monthly report to the student's case planning team (i.e., Case Planner, Supervisor, Socio-Therapist, Nurse or Care Coordinator, if applicable), that includes progress notes and key academic data.



These reports will be available on the Online Platform.

The Middle School Education Specialist contact a student's Case Planner if:

- The Middle School Education Specialist is unable to reach a student, parent or foster parent after multiple attempts;
- There are persistent scheduling issues with tutoring. If the student regularly misses sessions or the foster parent is proving difficult to schedule with, Case Planners can provide support. Since Case Planners are also in charge of scheduling students' medical appointments and family visits, it is helpful to touch base with them to make sure the tutoring schedule does not conflict with other agency-related appointments.
- If a student is experiencing a serious academic challenge, such as disciplinary action at school. This should be reported to the Case Planner immediately upon learning of the concern.

COORDINATING WITH THE SCHOOL

School staff and community resources are other stakeholders that the Middle School Education Specialist will work with. Teachers, counselors, social workers, school psychologists and the school administration all have a direct interest in the student's success, as their success contributes to the overall mission and goals of the school. As a result, the Middle School Education Specialist will collaborate with the school to explore options for students to improve and benefit from services offered such as academic intervention services, afterschool programming, special education services, and other supports.

In working with schools, the Middle School Education Specialist should request the student's most recent records immediately upon entry into foster care (including updated attendance, progress reports, latest report card, transcript, and latest IEP, if applicable). The Specialist should then get the students' report cards again in November and March (after parent teacher conferences) and at the end of June. See [Fair Futures Program Manual Section 5E: Monitoring Academic Performance](#).

The Middle School Education Specialist should also schedule school visits to meet with the student's guidance counselor and/or teachers and services providers, when possible. If the student has a special education teacher for multiple periods of the day, it would be ideal for the Specialist to meet with them. If there are concerns about how the student is doing in a particular class, it is best to meet with that teacher instead of the guidance counselor, and/or observe the student in that class (after first letting the student know they will be doing an observation).

Students in 8th grade should attend any meetings with the Middle School Education Specialist and guidance counselor. At these meetings, the Middle School Education Specialist should discuss the student's progress as well as any issues occurring in the school. The Middle School Education Specialist and counselor/teacher/service provider can then collaborate on a plan (with knowledge/ approval of the parent, who remains the primary decision-maker) to address any needs including improving attendance, grades, and behavior as well as ensuring that IEP services are being appropriately provided.

Once these initial meetings have occurred and records have been obtained, the Middle School Education Specialist should maintain regular contact with school staff to ensure the continued success of the students as well as follow up on progress towards goal achievement. Specialists may want to attend parent-teacher conferences with some families and invite parents and foster parents to school visits and other meetings when appropriate.

Middle School Education Specialists should have access to ATS. They can contact the Office of Education and Employment Initiatives at ACS by email: education.unit@acs.nyc.gov to request information on how to get access.

COORDINATING WITH EXTERNAL PROVIDERS.

The Middle School Education Specialist will also work with community resources including tutoring programs, mental health services, and afterschool programs. Collaborating with these stakeholders allows students to receive assistance and services on a broad spectrum that can foster continued success educationally as well as emotionally.

D. MIDDLE SCHOOL GOALS & STEPS – USING THE ONLINE PLATFORM

OVERVIEW

The Middle School Education Specialist can use the Online Platform to:



- Monitor academic performance
- Track educational advocacy services and supports provided
- Enter progress notes
- Document the list of high schools the student selected
- Track tutoring and extracurricular referrals

There are four Middle School Academic Goals in the Online Platform that the Middle School Education Specialist should complete for every middle student each year.

THE FOUR MIDDLE SCHOOL ACADEMIC GOALS INCLUDE:

- **Complete school year promoted with 90%+ attendance** and better prepared for high school by monitoring performance, providing educational advocacy, and referring them to tutoring and other services, as needed
- **Help all 8th graders enter a best-fit, quality high school** by providing individualized assistance with the high school selection process
- **Connect students to extracurricular activities**, ideally both afterschool and in the summer;
- **Ensure all students with an IEP or 504 Plan are receiving appropriate special education services or accommodations**

Each Goal has a series of **Required** and **Potential Steps** which represent progress towards those Goals. The Middle School Education Specialist should check off the Steps in the Online Platform as they are completed.

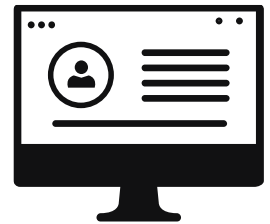
TIP! The Specialist can also always create their own step if one is not listed. For a visual of these Goals and their associated Steps, review [Appendix E_Goals & Steps Guide and Worksheets](#).

UPLOADING INITIAL DATA INTO THE YOUTH PROFILE ON THE ONLINE PLATFORM

All middle school students in foster care will have a Youth Profile added to the Online Platform.

The Youth Profile will contain key demographic and program data, including:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student's name | <input type="checkbox"/> Borough (case planning unit) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Current address | <input type="checkbox"/> Case Planner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Date of birth | <input type="checkbox"/> A notes section (<i>for other key info</i>) |



The Youth Profile will also include the student's academic data, high school selection data, and any tutoring history and extracurricular involvement. However, the Middle School Education Specialist does NOT have to enter this data directly into the Profile - this data will be captured as the Specialist monitors the student's progress towards completing Goals and Steps.

E. MONITORING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

USING THE ONLINE PLATFORM.

The Middle School Education Specialist can use the Online Platform to monitor progress towards the four Middle School Academic Goals and their associated steps. Note: The Online Platform developer is working with ACS to be able to automatically populate NYC DOE data into the Youth Profiles of all students in grades 6-12 so the data does not have to be entered manually.

The **Required Steps** for the "[Complete school year promoted with 90%+ attendance](#)" Goal include:

- Monitor attendance (monthly, or as frequently as provided)
- Monitor grade promotion status (in March and in June)
- Monitor grades (as frequently as provided)
- Monitor NYS exam scores when they become available

The Middle School Education Specialist should check off each of these steps as they are completed for every student each year. **Once the step is checked off, the Online Platform will prompt the Specialist to record that piece of data.** For example, after checking off the "Monitor grades" step, the Online Platform will ask what the grades were, and the Middle School Education Specialist can enter them. This data will be automatically updated in the Youth Profile.



REPORTS

To view/monitor performance, the Middle School Education Specialist can create automated reports in the "Reports" section of the Online Platform that shows the academic data captured for all middle school students. *Reports can be viewed on an individual or aggregated level.*



ALERT BOX

The Online Platform will also automatically flag students whose performance falls below a certain level. These students will appear in the "Alert Box." This will help the Middle School Education Specialist follow up with any advocacy or supports, as needed, including an attendance intervention, tutoring referrals, an IEP evaluation, busing/transportation support, etc.

The following sections provide guidance around what to look for when monitoring academic data, and what follow-up steps could be taken if support is required.

MONITORING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: ATTENDANCE

Attendance is a key piece of academic data.

There are two particular categories to focus on when monitoring academic performance:

1. Students that have a major drop in attendance from one month to the next
2. Students with less than 85% attendance

Specialists should ensure that they follow up with the family and case planning team with regards to both categories of students. An updated list of these students should be sent to each Case Planner, as well as their Supervisor and related staff. Specialists should follow up to determine why there was a drop-in attendance and/or what is causing students to miss an excessive amount of school.

Case planning teams and Specialists should work together with foster parents (and/or parents, when applicable) to develop and implement a plan to address the attendance issues. Specialists should continue to monitor attendance closely to ensure that the student's attendance improves.

EXAMPLES OF ATTENDANCE-RELATED ISSUES AND STEPS THAT CAN BE TAKEN TO RESOLVE THEM INCLUDE:

Medical issue: The case planning team should work on getting medical documentation to the school in order to excuse the student absences. The Middle School Education Specialist should also contact the school to ensure that the student is being provided work in order to keep up with school curriculum. If doctor's appointments are regularly scheduled during school hours, the team may need to work with the agency's clinical, medical, or care coordination team to ensure that appointments are scheduled outside of school hours or to explore other providers. Case planning may also need to support foster parents so that they do not keep students out of school all day for a short appointment.

Transportation/busing issues: If the student has an IEP that includes transportation or otherwise qualifies for busing, check with the school and family to ensure that busing is being provided and that the bus is arriving on time. If busing is not on the IEP but is needed, follow up with the school and the parent (who must consent to the service) to see if it can be amended to include busing. Specialists should also refer to the ACS School Stability Transportation protocol to see if the student qualifies for other DOE transportation or if there are other ways the agency or ACS could provide transportation support.

Issues with school climate or program: Sometimes a student's attendance drops because of a problem going on in the school, such as bullying, the school's failure to provide mandated special education or English as a New Language services, or the student's need for a different type of school environment entirely. If a student's attendance difficulties do not appear to be related to medical, transportation, or other easily identifiable issues, the Middle School Education Specialist and case planning team will need to discuss any concerns with the student to determine the reason behind their school refusal before coming up with a plan to address those needs.



Any steps taken should then be checked off - or created - in the Online Platform.

MONITORING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: GRADE PROMOTION

In March, DOE provides ACS and the foster care agencies with lists of all students whose promotion is in doubt. These are the students that are in danger of being retained in their current grade. Agencies can also access this information via ATS or NYCSA.

Often times, these students should not be retained but promoted to the next grade level with the appropriate academic supports in place. Once students reach second grade, research shows that grade retention is almost never beneficial to students, and in fact, being retained a grade is by far the greatest single predictor of high school dropout.

While **ACS will share Promotion in Doubt (PID)** lists with agencies in early March, schools are required to inform families if a student's promotion is in doubt by February 15th, and many schools send out PID letters as early as the last week of January. Schools are also required to inform families if students are at risk of not meeting standards during Fall parent-teacher conferences.

Whenever the Middle School Education Specialist learns that a student is at risk or promotion may be in doubt, the Specialist should immediately alert the student's Case Planner and family to collaborate on developing an effective plan to assist the student. They should also contact the school to ensure that an appropriate plan is put into place for each student to assist in successfully promoting them to the next grade level.

Any student who is at risk of not meeting grade level standards is entitled under NYS regulations to **Academic Intervention Services (AIS)**.

Schools have discretion as to what form the AIS will take, but it must be targeted to address the area(s) in which the student is struggling.

AIS can include:

- Before school, after school, or Saturday tutoring;
- Small group and/or individual teacher instruction;
- At risk speech, counseling, or SETSS services;
- Remedial small-class instruction

Aside from mandated AIS, Specialists may consider requesting make-up or extra-credit work for the student, including additional homework packets and projects, referring the student for additional tutoring, applying to a summer program for the student that includes academic supports, or referring the student for special education services. If the student already has an IEP, they may need a re-evaluation to determine if additional or more intensive special education services are needed. As always, parental consent is required.

Once these supports are put into place, Specialists should closely monitor the student's progress and follow up with schools in June to determine if the student has been recommended for summer school or if the student was successfully promoted.

In mid-June, ACS provides agencies with a list of students who must attend summer school; agencies can also access this info on their info via ATS or NYCSA. If the student was recommended or mandated for summer school, Specialists should contact the case planning team and the family immediately to ensure the student enrolls in summer school, confirm their attendance on the first day, and monitor their attendance throughout the summer. ACS also provides data to agencies on summer school attendance during the summer months. When summer school concludes in August, Specialists should follow up with schools on final promotion decisions and, if a student is retained, consider appealing the holdover decision.

MONITORING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: GRADES

A student's grades are key pieces of academic data. Typically, schools give out elementary and middle school report cards in the fall (November) and spring (March) parent-teacher conferences, as well as at the end of June (and if the student attends summer school, at the end of the summer). There are interim grades as well, but those are the most important junctures.

After reviewing grades, the Middle School Education Specialist should complete the following **Steps**:

- Follow up on any failed classes and the drivers;
- Inquire what happened if a grade is below 75 or if there was a 10+ point drop in the grade from one period to the next.

Potential Steps the Middle School Education Specialist could to take if a student has low grades include:

- Refer students to a tutor, especially if grades are below 75 (or mostly 1s and 2s for those schools with a 1-4 system);
- Consider afterschool programming or Response To Intervention support;
- Speak to/meet with the school staff to discuss performance, progress, and any needs;
- Speak to/meet with the student's Case Planner and/or parent to discuss performance, progress, and any needs;
- Help young person enroll in summer school;
- Help student obtain IEP or 504 Plan;
- Conduct advocacy with DOE/school to help student obtain particular service or accommodation.

MONITORING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: NEW YORK STATE EXAMS

In the Spring each year, students in grades 3 to 8 take the New York State Common Core exams in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math. Fourth and 8th grade students also take science exams.

Scores range from 1-4 and reflect the following performance:

- 1:** Far below grade level standards
- 2:** Approaching grade level standards
- 3:** At grade level standards
- 4:** Exceeding grade level standards



After NYS Exam scores are released the Middle School Education Specialist should enter these in the Online Platform. If students are receiving low scores, supports should be put into place (see above Potential Steps).

To accomplish the Goal of being promoted each year with 90%+ attendance, the Middle School Education Specialist may have to perform educational advocacy (See Fair Futures Program Manual Section 5F and Section 5G) and/or connect students to tutors (See Fair Futures Program Manual Section 6), as needed.



Once the school year is complete, the Middle School Education Specialist will check off whether the Goal was completed or not. The Online Platform will prompt the Specialist to enter the final attendance rate and grade promotion status.

F. GENERAL EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM ADVOCACY

The Specialist offers both **long-term individualized interventions** for students with complex or ongoing educational needs and **targeted short-term supports** to ensure every student has access to a particular service or opportunity.

A **long-term** or **caseload intervention** is generally defined as *any educational intervention that progresses toward a goal that will require more than one week or 4 contacts to accomplish*. An example of a case that would qualify a long-term intervention would be following up on a student who is being denied IEP services or improperly excluded from the classroom. An example of short-term assistance could include connections to advocacy or referrals to supports, as needed.

Middle School Education Specialists should use Progress Notes to formulate action plans for students and document the advocacy steps taken. **Progress Notes** can be submitted in the Online Platform and can be inputted with specific Goals or Steps. Progress Notes for each student can be downloaded from the Online Platform by generating a Report.

SUSPENSION ADVOCACY

A student may receive a **Principal's Suspension** of 1 to 5 days. During a Principal's Suspension, students remain in their school but are removed from their classroom for the duration of the suspension. When a Principal's Suspension occurs, the school must hold a Principal's Suspension conference with the parent to discuss the events that led to the suspension and develop a plan to avoid future suspensions. Middle School Education Specialists should participate in these meetings with families whenever possible, work with schools to develop plans to address student behaviors, and advocate for additional supports when needed.

During a **Superintendent Suspension**, a student may be suspended for more than 5 days (up to 1 year). A Superintendent Suspension is served outside of the student's school at a designated suspension site. A Superintendent Suspension requires a formal hearing.

In the event of a superintendent suspension, the Middle School Education Specialist needs to:

- Obtain a copy of the suspension letter, which will include the date and time of the suspension hearing, the charges, and the location of the suspension site. The parent should receive the suspension letter within 24 hours of the suspension, however, if they do not, request a copy from the school or the suspension office.
- Obtain the suspension packet from the school. This will include any witness statements, occurrence reports, and other information the school will use as evidence at the hearing.
- Speak with the student, parent, and/or case planning team to get the student's side of the story.
- Confirm with the family and suspension site that the student is attending consistently and receiving school work.
- Contact the school to find out the length of suspension they will be recommending to the hearing office. Try to assess if they might consider a shorter suspension if the student pleads no contest and/or agrees to engage in services.
- Review the suspension packet. Considering the available evidence and the student's version of the events, think about how to might argue for a shorter suspension or dismissal of the charges altogether, where appropriate. Consult with one of the above resources if unsure or would like to obtain representation for the child.
- Provide the suspension packet to the representation team and meet with all parties so the student can provide their account of the event to the representation team.
- Attend the hearing with the student, parent, and representation present. *Note: In the event that one or all parties are unable to attend the hearing, it can be adjourned to another date so that representation can be secured before the hearing.*
- If the student has an IEP, the school will conduct a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meeting to determine if the infraction was the result of the student's disability. The date of the meeting will be included in the suspension letter. Specialists should participate in the MDR, along with the parent/foster parent and student, when appropriate.

Note: If it is determined that the infraction was a result of the student's disability or the school's failure to implement the student's IEP, the student must be reinstated to their school immediately.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES SPECIALISTS CAN USE IN THE EVENT OF A SUPERINTENDENT SUSPENSION INCLUDE:

- **Legal Aid Society:** Will only be able to take the case if the student has a Legal Aid attorney (and no conflict of interest).
- **Advocates for Children:** Will take the case if they can make a significant difference and if staff is available.
- **Suspension Representation Project:** Will accept most other cases in the event that Advocates for Children or Legal Aid Society is unable to do so; this should be the third course of action, however.

G. ADVOCACY FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students in care can struggle academically for many reasons including experiencing significant gaps in school attendance and transferring multiple times, as well as mental health and behavioral concerns. Due to these issues, Education Specialists often find themselves advocating for students to receive academic intervention services to help bring them up to speed and bridge any gaps in their education.

Some students may just need an **afterschool program, Response to Intervention, or 504 accommodation**. In other cases, it may be in the student's best interest to be referred to an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** right away.

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI)

One way to collaborate with school stakeholders on assisting students is to advocate for **Academic Intervention Services (AIS)**.

One form of AIS is **Response to Intervention (RTI)** services. RTI services are to be implemented whenever a student is at risk of not meeting grade level standards. Schools are required to provide RTI services prior to referring students for an Individualized Education Program (IEP). However, if a parent wants to refer their child for special education services, the school district is required to move forward with the evaluation, while also implementing RTI for the student.

Examples of RTI Services include:

- Individual and Group Counseling
- Speech Therapy
- Small group instruction
- Before school, after school, or weekend tutoring

The Middle School Education Specialist should advocate for students to receive the most appropriate services available.

At times, students may need extra assistance to bridge gaps in their education prior to receiving a more comprehensive evaluation or an IEP. This is why it is important to have schools support students with RTI services first before evaluating for an IEP due to a suspected learning disability.

A student may be found ineligible for an IEP. In this case, the school can also offer RTI services in place of Special Education Services. The student may also qualify for a 504 Plan.

504 PLANS

A student may have a disability that does not necessitate special education services. **This can occur when the student has a medical or mental health diagnosis that requires accommodation**, but their grades and academic progress are on track. **Accommodations** could include testing accommodations, extended time to complete homework or classwork, schedule breaks, or large print books or materials. In these instances, a 504 plan can ensure that the student receives needed accommodations and serves as a preventive measure to inhibit future academic issues.

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS

Only the parent or the school can refer a student for a special education evaluation. However, agency staff can request that the school refer the student when appropriate. The Middle School Education Specialist should recommend (or request) that a parent or school refer a student for a Special Education Evaluation if it is believed that the student has a learning or other disability that interferes with their ability to progress in school.

To refer a student for a Special Education Evaluation, the parent or school must submit a referral letter to the school-based support team at their school. If the student attends a charter or private school, the letter should go to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) where the school is located.

Whenever possible, the Specialist should write the referral letter on behalf of the parent and have the parent sign the letter. *School districts are required to accept referrals from a student's parent but can decline referral requests from other sources.*

If the parent cannot be located and a surrogate parent is required or waiting on the parent's signature would cause inordinate delay, the Middle School Education Specialist can submit a request for referral to the school. Once the school or CSE receives the request, they will contact the parent to schedule a meeting, called a social history, and seek consent to proceed with the evaluations. In the event that the parents' rights have been terminated, surrendered or limited, or if the parent is deceased, the foster parent or legal guardian can consent. *Foster care agency staff may never provide consent for special education services.*

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY AT INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) MEETINGS

Middle School Education Specialists can be powerful advocates for students with disabilities. Students often do not have an effective advocate on their side with regard to IEP development and services. Specialists can ensure an IEP focuses on the best interest of the student and that the student is receiving the services they need to be successful.

Effective advocacy includes working with the student (if age appropriate), family, and case planning team to determine a course of action that would be in the best interest of the student. Once a plan is developed, Specialists should attend the meeting well informed of their student's needs in order to work with the school IEP team on developing an appropriate IEP. Specialists should be present at all IEP meetings for students on their caseloads along with the parent(s), foster parent(s) (when they are the education decision-maker, or if the parent would like them to be present), and Case Planner.

Upon completion of the IEP meeting, Education Specialists should follow up with the school and/or CSE to obtain a copy of the finalized IEP, confirm that the services are being implemented, and monitor the student's progress.

Once a student has been found eligible for an IEP, effective advocacy can also include **requesting new evaluations or a re-evaluation, requesting an independent educational evaluation, and requesting mediation or an impartial hearing:**

Requesting new evaluations: If a student is not progressing despite receiving special education services, the Middle School Education Specialist can request additional evaluations, such as an assistive technology, auditory processing, speech/language, functional behavioral assessment, or other specialized evaluation, as well as an updated psycho-educational evaluation, to determine if the IEP needs to be amended or additional services need to be provided in order to meet the student's needs. The student's parent would need to consent to the evaluation for it to take place.

Requesting an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE): If the student is not demonstrating progress and the evaluation that the school district conducted is not accurate or adequate, a Specialist can request an independent evaluation at the school district's expense. The student's parent would need to initiate and consent to an independent evaluation as well.

Requesting an impartial hearing: In the event that the district is not providing the student with appropriate evaluations, programming or services, the parent/guardian can request mediation or an impartial hearing. An effort should be made to work with the teacher, principal, IEP team, and CSE first before pursuing an impartial hearing.

GOALS & STEPS



The Middle School Education Specialist should monitor progress toward the Goal: **"Ensure that all students with an IEP or 504 plan are receiving appropriate special education services or accommodations,"** and its associated steps using the Online Platform.

Required Steps, based on the guidance above, include:

- Obtain copy of most recent IEP/504 Plan and ensure it is current within the last year
- Participate in annual IEP meeting and/or 504 meeting; *try to ensure the student and student's parent participates in meeting*
- Confirm student is receiving all accommodations and services mandated by 504 or IEP, and is in the right classroom setting

Potential Steps, based on relevance and/or need, include:

- Renew 504 Plan
- Obtain copy of most recent psycho-educational evaluation and ensure it is current within the last 3 years (required for students with IEPs but not 504s)
- Request new accommodation(s), if needed (requires parent's consent)
- Request that the school conduct a new IEP or 504 evaluation, if needed (requires parent's consent)
- Request that the school make changes to IEP, if needed (requires parent's consent)
- Request an independent educational evaluation if student is not demonstrating progress and the school evaluation is not comprehensive (requires parental consent)
- If needed, work with educational decision-maker to exercise due process rights on behalf of student (e.g., request mediation or an impartial hearing. *This should only happen after talking with the student's teachers, principal, IEP team, and case planning team (and when needed, the District Superintendent).*)

H. MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION PROCESS

! APPROXIMATELY 50% OF STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE IN NYC REPEAT THE 9TH GRADE, AND ONLY 21% OBTAIN A HIGH SCHOOL DEGREE/EQUIVALENCY BY AGE 21.
(ACCORDING TO ACS DATA AS OF DECEMBER 2018)

The Fair Futures model upholds that in addition to better supporting students in middle school, ALL students and their families should be provided with **individualized assistance with the high school selection process**. High school fit and quality are important drivers of graduation and post-secondary readiness. If a student starts off in a best-fit high school environment, they will be more likely to succeed.

The NYC high school selection process can be extremely challenging and confusing, and students in foster care often do not get the individualized assistance they need from guidance counselors (due to very high ratios), Case Planners, or foster parents. As a result, students often end up in local, lower-performing schools.

INDIVIDUALIZED ASSISTANCE TO ALL STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

In the Fair Futures model, the Middle School Education Specialist provides guidance to all 8th grade students around the high school selection process. School fairs and tours begin in early fall; students receive access to their online applications in October; and they must submit a list of up to 12 high schools by early December. The Middle School Education Specialist should assist as much as possible with developing that list and must ensure that all eligible students submit a completed application.

To provide the best guidance possible, the Middle School Education Specialist will receive comprehensive training from Advocates for Children and be equipped with a guide to the high school admissions process. See [Appendix F5_High School Selection Guide](#) for a detailed overview of the high school selection process and how to assist students in selecting best-fit schools based on their interests, academic performance, and needs.

The overall goal is for the Middle School Education Specialist to optimize the chances that students will enter best-fit, quality high schools by strategically selecting a list of 12 schools. To do so, the Middle School Education Specialist must be:

- Knowledgeable of the key metrics of high school quality (e.g., safety, academic outcomes, graduation rates, etc.) and how they can vary by borough;
- Able to research high schools based on student's interests, performance, needs, and geographical preference;
- Familiar with admissions criteria and what constitutes a realistic match based on a student's interests, performance, and preferences.

Whenever possible, the Middle School Education Specialist should also assist 5th graders with the middle school selection process, which is similar but often less complicated as there are fewer options. The Specialist's ability to provide individualized support will depend on their caseload and the total number of 5th and 8th graders at any particular agency. Even if the Middle School Education Specialist will not be providing individualized assistance to all 5th graders with the middle school applications, they can try to ensure that all 5th graders complete one. See [Appendix F4.0_Middle School Selection and Admissions Guide](#) for more information.

COORDINATING WITH FAMILIES, THE SCHOOL, AND CASE PLANNERS

To successfully assist with the high school selection process, the Middle School Education Specialist must meet with the student, foster parent, or birth parent (if the student has left foster care) to discuss options. They will also need to coordinate with the student's school and Case Planner and conduct or coordinate visits to high school fairs and potential high schools.

While ultimately the student and parent can submit a list of any 12 high schools that they would like, it is the responsibility of the Middle School Education Specialist to guide that process as much as possible. This includes establishing trust, explaining why the process is so important, and providing information and guidance when a selection may not be appropriate.

Tips for navigating this process are covered in detail in the [Advocates for Children mandated training](#). See also [Appendix F5_High School Selection Guide](#).

GOALS & STEPS

For the “**Help all 8th graders enter a best-fit, quality high school**” Goal, the Required and Potential Steps include:

Required Steps:

- Meet with the student/family to explain the process and develop preliminary list of schools in line with the student’s interests, preferences, and performance
- Visit at least one high school with student, or coordinate visit with case planner/family to ensure student’s attendance
- Check student’s online application as soon as available to ensure demographic information is accurate
- Review student’s application and list of schools before it is submitted
- Ensure student/family submits completed application by the December deadline
- Check in with student/family when they receive their offer letter in March

Potential Steps:

- Attend high school fair with student, or coordinate visit with case planner/family to ensure student’s attendance
- Meet with student’s guidance counselor to discuss their application
- Arrange tutoring for the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) prep in the spring/summer
- Ensure student signs up for the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) with their guidance counselor in September and attends testing date in October
- Help the student complete their portfolio (if applying to a visual arts school)
- Help student prepare, sign up for, and attend an audition (if applying to a performing arts school)
- Schedule school interview and/or assessment (if required)
- Complete charter school application(s)
- Monitor student’s placement on waitlists
- Submit timely appeal (if needed)
- Celebrate acceptance into desired school/program



Once the list of up to 12 high schools is submitted, the Online Platform will prompt the Middle School Education Specialist to enter the names of those schools/programs, the schools’ most recent graduation rates, etc., into the Youth Profile.

I. CONNECTIONS TO EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

As discussed in the Career Development section, career development experiences include extracurricular activities, community service, and youth leadership programs. It is important for students to gain these types of experiences as early as possible, as they help build critical social/emotional skills, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose/belonging. Research also shows that it is especially important for middle school students to stay active after school and during the summer.

The Middle School Education Specialist should track in the Online Platform which students are involved in extracurricular activities. This information can be obtained through the student, parent(s), school, Tutor, or Case Planner. If a student is not involved in an afterschool or summer activity, the Specialist should make a referral. **Keep in mind that applications for summer programs, including scholarships and free programs, become available in January-February and often fill up quickly.**

TIP! ACS also has a new partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development to better connect middle school students in foster care to extracurricular programming.

ACS and DYCD conduct a semiannual data match in order to identify non-enrolled students and connect interested students to DYCD programs. DYCD also just developed a new tool that helps connect youth to all of the DYCD programs they might be eligible for. Visit the DYCD [website](#) for more information.

GOALS & STEPS

For the **“Connect students to extracurricular activities” Goal**, monitor progress by completing Steps in the Online Platform.

Required Steps include:

- Connect the student to an afterschool program or extracurricular activity, ideally one in line with their interests
After this Step is checked off, the Online Platform will prompt the Middle School Education Specialist to input the program name and date of enrollment (if known).

TIP! If the attempt was unsuccessful, the Middle School Education Specialist should check the “could not connect” box and enter a note explaining why

- Connect the student to a summer program or extracurricular activity, ideally one in line with their interests
After this is checked off, the Online Platform will ask what the program name is and date of enrollment (if known)
If the attempt was unsuccessful, the Middle School Education Specialist should check the “could not connect” box and enter a note explaining why
- At the end of the summer and school year, check in to see how long the student was engaged in the program/activity
After this is checked off, the Online Platform will prompt the user to input how long the student was engaged
If the student was never connected, the Middle School Education Specialist should check “N/A.”

Potential Steps include:

- Discuss options with the parent and/or ask the tutor to discuss options with the parent
- Coordinate with ACS to secure an open DYCD program slot
- Coordinate with school
- Research options in line with students' interests
- Help the student enroll, if needed

J. CONNECTION TO WEEKLY, IN-HOME TUTORING

A Potential Step of the Goal **“Complete school year promoted with 90% attendance”** is to **“Refer student to a tutor, as most students can benefit from tutoring”**. Connecting 6th to 8th students to supports like tutoring is an important component of the Middle School Education Specialist position.

If there is not enough capacity to provide ALL students with a tutor, those who are Promotion in Doubt or with grades under 75 should be prioritized.



Once this step is checked off in the Online Platform, the Middle School Education Specialist will be prompted to enter whether the referral resulted in a tutor or not. The Online Platform will ask for the Tutor's name, contact information, and tutoring start date.

Once a student has a Tutor, the Middle School Education Specialist should be in touch with the Tutor at least monthly to monitor the student's progress and provide follow-up support, if required.