



# PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF NORTH CAROLINA

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION | Mark Johnson, *Superintendent of Public Instruction*

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## Considerations for Supporting Student Sensory Processing Differences in Schools

### NCDPI Exceptional Children (EC) Division Perspective

This guidance is provided in response to requests from Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and charter schools seeking information on the development and use of 'sensory rooms' in public school buildings.

The EC Division does not endorse the use of sensory rooms for the following reasons:

- Time in a sensory room may be the equivalent of removal from the general education setting and, as such, carry legal implications for:
  - repeated removals
  - suspicion of disability/Child Find
  - educational placement
  - least restrictive environment
  - restraint/seclusion
  - student safety
- Placement of students in a sensory room may result in loss of instructional time
- Sensory integration interventions are not identified as evidenced-based for students with autism
- Schools rarely have adequate staff who are appropriately qualified or trained to design and deliver interventions using specialized equipment often found in a sensory room
- Interventions requiring a sensory room/specialized sensory equipment are extremely intense and rarely required as a general education support
- Sensory processing differences can be effectively addressed through a variety of other less intense, lower liability, lower resource-dependent supports and interventions
- Sensory rooms are extremely 'resource-hungry' areas: cost of equipment procurement and maintenance; allocation of school building/instructional space; and, cost of appropriately trained personnel for sensory room interventions and monitoring must all be accounted for as part of the problem-solving process.

The vast majority of student needs related to sensory processing differences can be met in the classroom, across the school environment/routines, and within existing tiered supports without the use of a designated 'sensory room.'

### Background

Sensory rooms, sometimes referred to as calming or coping rooms, are based on the concept of reducing a person's maladaptive response to environmental triggers; placement in the room is offered as a coping strategy for the person in states of intense over- or under-arousal. Sensory

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rooms can be found in therapeutic clinics, hospitals, homes, and, increasingly, in schools (Roley, Bissell, and Clark, 2009) to support self-regulation and prevention/de-escalation of challenging behaviors. Sensory rooms are not the same as comfortable corners or quiet areas teachers sometimes create inside general education classrooms.

The use of sensory rooms and strategies derives from the sensory integration (SI) theory on human performance, which is one of many frameworks occupational therapists use to evaluate and support students with sensory processing differences (SPD; comprehensive assessment and intervention focused on sensory processing disorder is considered advanced-level practice for occupational therapists, Smith Roley & Jacobs, 2008). The evidence base for sensory integration therapies is inconclusive (Lang, O'Reilly, Healy, Rispoli, Lydon, Streusand, Davis, Kang, Sigafos, Lancioni, Didden, and Giesbers, 2012) and sensory interventions are not included in [\*Evidence-Based Practices for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder\*](#).

Some students experience intense sensory responses with resulting disruptive behaviors while at school. In fact, the frequency and intensity of these sensory responses may be the primary factor adversely impacting the student's academic and functional performance. If the intensity of the student's behavioral and sensory needs is so high as to require a separate setting to receive sustained interventions (e.g., routine visits to a sensory room), the team should suspect the student has a disability and consider his/her eligibility for services under IDEA or Section 504. When this is the case, a student's unique needs arising from SPD must be addressed with interventions known to be effective. School teams, when considering the need for specially designed interventions to address SPD, must use school-based student performance data; current data from external sources should be considered when available, but these external data sources will not be sufficient to assess the impact of the student's SPD on participation in the general education setting. Even with intensive needs, the goal is to keep students engaged in the general education setting for as much of the school day/routine as possible.

## References

- Lang, R., O'Reilly, M., Healy, O., Rispoli, M., Lydon, H., Streusand, W., ... & Didden, R. (2012). Sensory integration therapy for autism spectrum disorders: A systematic review. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 6(3), 1004-1018.
- Roley, S. S., Julie Bissell, M. A., & Clark, G. F. (2009). Providing occupational therapy using sensory integration theory and methods in school-based practice. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63(6), 823.
- Smith Roley, S., & Jacobs, S. (2008). Sensory integration. In E. B. Crepeau, E. S. Cohn, & B. A. B. Schell (Eds.), *Willard and Spackman's occupational therapy* (11th ed., pp. 792–817). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.