

Executive Functioning Supports in School

(Bison Bridge Behavioral Insights Parent Resource — K–12 Edition)

What is Executive Functioning?

Executive functioning is a set of mental skills that help students manage time, stay organized, control impulses, and follow through on tasks. These are “behind-the-scenes” brain functions that play a big role in success at school.

According to experts like **Dr. George McCloskey** and **Dr. Steven Feifer**, executive functioning is not a single skill, but a network of self-regulation systems that allow students to:

- Start tasks (initiation)
- Stay focused and shift attention as needed (attention control)
- Hold information in their mind (working memory)
- Regulate emotions and behavior (self-regulation)
- Monitor their performance and self-correct (self-monitoring)
- Plan, organize, and manage time (planning and organization)

Some students struggle with these skills, especially those with ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, or anxiety. These difficulties are often invisible but significantly impact daily school success.

Common Executive Functioning Challenges

- Forgetting to turn in assignments (even when they’re done)
- Trouble starting or finishing work without reminders
- Losing focus or becoming easily distracted
- Struggling with planning, time management, or prioritizing
- Meltdowns or shutdowns when routines change
- Rushing through work or having trouble checking their own work

These are not signs of laziness or defiance — they are signs of a **support need** related to how the brain organizes and regulates actions.

School-Based Supports That Help

General Education / MTSS

- Use of visual schedules or task checklists
- Breaking tasks into smaller steps
- Teacher check-ins or reminders
- Seating near the front or away from distractions
- Use of timers, planners, or apps

504 Plan Accommodations

- Extra time on assignments or tests
- Access to notes, outlines, or graphic organizers
- Flexibility with deadlines or pacing
- Option to work in a quieter space

IEP Services or Goals

- Instructional support in organization or planning
- Weekly goal-setting or check-in time
- Social-emotional or self-regulation skills groups
- Written goals targeting task initiation or completion

What Helps at Home

- Use one-step directions and visual cues
- Set up consistent routines with reminders
- Allow breaks between tasks
- Use checklists and visual timers
- Praise effort and small wins — building confidence matters

What Parents Say

- “Once we treated it as a learning need, not a behavior issue, everything changed.”
 - “Visual checklists made a bigger difference than I expected.”
 - “She wasn’t trying to avoid work — she just didn’t know where to start.”
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 **Parent Reflection Space**

- Where does my child struggle most: getting started, staying focused, or finishing?
 - What tools or routines help my child stay on track at home?
 - What supports could we try at school?
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 **Important Reminder**

Executive functioning is a skill set — not a fixed trait. With practice, support, and the right tools, students can grow these skills over time. If challenges are interfering with learning, you can request support through general education, a 504 Plan, or an IEP.

To learn more or explore supports, talk with your child’s teacher, school counselor, or special education team.