



IEP Reference Guide

A plain-language overview of federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – the law that authorizes Individual Education Plans

A companion to:

Hidden Language of Children podcast
Episode 22
The Ups and Downs of IEPs:
Navigating the Process – Episode 22

Part 1

What the Law Says and Promises

IDEA is the federal law that guarantees special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities. First passed in 1975 (as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) and most recently reauthorized in 2004, it is organized into four parts — A through D — each covering a distinct layer of the system.

Part A — General Provisions (the Law's Foundation)

Part A opens with Congress's own statement of why the law exists. Its findings acknowledge that millions of children with disabilities were historically either excluded from public schools entirely or educated in settings that failed to meet their needs. The law's stated purpose is to remedy this — ensuring that every child with a disability receives a **free appropriate public education (FAPE)** that prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living.

Part A also defines the key terms used throughout the law — including what qualifies as a **disability**, what counts as **special education**, and what **related services** means. These definitions matter enormously because eligibility and entitlement flow directly from them.

Part B — Services for School-Age Children (Ages 3–21)

This is the heart of the law and the part most parents encounter. Part B lays out the rights and requirements for children ages 3 through 21 (or high school graduation). Its major promises, in the order the law addresses them, are:

1. State Eligibility — What States Must Do to Receive Federal Funds

States must agree to provide free appropriate public education to all eligible children with disabilities; maintain a policy of zero rejection (no child can be excluded); and establish systems to locate, identify, and evaluate children who may need services — a process called **Child Find**. States that accept IDEA funding are bound by all of its requirements.



2. Evaluation and Eligibility

Before any services begin, a child must be formally evaluated to determine whether they have a qualifying disability and need special education as a result. The law requires evaluations to be comprehensive, conducted by qualified professionals, completed within 60 days of parental consent, and free of charge. Parents must consent before any evaluation occurs, and they may request an independent evaluation if they disagree with the school's findings.

3. The Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Once a child is found eligible, the school must develop an IEP — a written plan tailored to that specific child. The law specifies exactly what an IEP must contain: the child's present levels of performance; measurable annual goals; the special education services and related services to be provided; the extent to which the child will participate in general education; accommodations for state and district testing; and transition planning (beginning at age 16). The IEP must be reviewed at least annually.

4. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The law requires that children with disabilities be educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Removal to more restrictive settings is only justified when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in a general classroom cannot be achieved satisfactorily, even with supplementary aids and services.

5. Procedural Safeguards — Parent Rights

A substantial portion of Part B is dedicated to protecting parents' rights in the process. These include: the right to participate in all IEP meetings; the right to receive Prior Written Notice whenever the school proposes or refuses to take action; the right to inspect all educational records; the right to request an independent evaluation at public expense; and the right to dispute decisions through mediation, a state complaint process, or a due process hearing.

6. Discipline

The law addresses the special circumstances that arise when a child with a disability is subject to disciplinary removal from school. Schools may remove a child for up to 10 days without special protections. Beyond 10 days, schools must conduct a **Manifestation Determination Review** — a process to determine whether the behavior is related to the child's disability — before proceeding with longer removals. Educational services must continue during any removal.

Part C — Early Intervention (Birth to Age 3)

Part C covers the earliest years, funding states to provide early intervention services to infants and toddlers (birth through age 2) with developmental delays or disabilities. The vehicle here is not an IEP but an **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)** — a plan that includes the child and centers the family, providing services in the child's **natural environment** (typically the home). When a child turns 3, they transition out of Part C services and, if still eligible, into Part B.

Part D — National Improvement Activities

Part D funds research, personnel preparation, technical assistance, and dissemination of information aimed at improving special education nationally. It is less directly relevant to individual families but supports the broader infrastructure — training teachers, funding studies on what works, and spreading effective practices across states.



Part 2

Key Acronyms

These are the acronyms parents and educators are most likely to encounter, organized roughly from the broadest (the law itself) to the most day-to-day.

The Law & System

- **IDEA** — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The federal law governing special education for children with disabilities from birth through age 21.
- **FAPE** — Free Appropriate Public Education. The core guarantee of IDEA: every eligible child is entitled to special education and related services at no cost, designed to meet their unique needs.
- **LRE** — Least Restrictive Environment. The requirement that children with disabilities be educated alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
- **IDEA Part B** — The section of IDEA covering school-age children (ages 3–21).
- **IDEA Part C** — The section covering early intervention for infants and toddlers (birth to age 3).
- **LEA** — Local Education Agency. The school district or local authority responsible for providing services under IDEA.
- **SEA** — State Education Agency. The state-level department of education, which oversees compliance with IDEA within the state.

Evaluation & Eligibility

- **PLAAPF** (also PLOP or PLP) — Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance. The section of the IEP that describes the child's current academic situation — the baseline from which all goals are set.
- **IEE** — Independent Educational Evaluation. An evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the school district. Parents can request one at public expense if they disagree with the district's evaluation.
- **Child Find** — Not an acronym but a key legal duty: the obligation of schools and states to proactively locate, identify, and evaluate all children who may have a disability, including those in private schools and those not yet in school.

Planning Documents

- **ETR** — The formal document produced when a school completes a multidisciplinary evaluation of a child, summarizing findings and determining whether the child qualifies for special education services.
- **MFE** — Multifactorial Evaluation. The Ohio-specific term used to refer to the ETR. In other states, it may also be referred to as an Evaluation Report, Comprehensive Evaluation, or Psychoeducational Evaluation.



- **IEP** — Individualized Education Program. The written plan, based largely on the ETR and developed collaboratively by a team that includes parents, outlining a child's special education services, goals, accommodations, and placement. Required for all eligible children ages 3–21.
- **IFSP** — Individualized Family Service Plan. The Part C equivalent of the IEP, for children birth to age 3. Centers the family as well as the child, and requires services to be delivered in the child's natural environment.
- **504 Plan** — Not part of the IDEA law, but frequently confused with an IEP. A 504 plan comes from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and provides accommodations (not specialized instruction) to students with disabilities who don't qualify for special education under IDEA.

Process & Procedures

- **PWN** — Prior Written Notice. A written notice the school must provide to parents every time it proposes or refuses to make a change regarding the child's identification, evaluation, placement, or services. One of the most important — and underused — parent protections in IDEA.
- **MDR** — Manifestation Determination Review. A required meeting, held within 10 days of a disciplinary removal exceeding 10 days, to determine whether the behavior that led to discipline was caused by or related to the child's disability.
- **NOREP** — Notice of Recommended Educational Placement (used in some states). Functionally similar to PWN, notifying parents of the school's proposed placement.
- **IEP Team** — The group of people required by law to participate in developing and reviewing the IEP, including parents, at least one general education teacher, at least one special education teacher, a school administrator, and (when appropriate) the student.

Services & Settings

- **RSP / Resource Specialist Program** — A setting where students receive part of their instruction outside the general classroom from a special education teacher.
- **SDC** — Special Day Class. A self-contained special education classroom for students who need more intensive support than an RSP can provide.
- **Re-Ed** — Re-Education Program. A therapeutic day or residential program for students with significant emotional and behavioral challenges, offering more intensive intervention than a Special Day Class typically provides.
- **Related Services** — Support services required to help a child benefit from special education, such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), counseling, and transportation.
- **OT** — Occupational Therapy. A related service addressing fine motor skills, sensory processing, and functional daily tasks.
- **PT** — Physical Therapy. A related service addressing gross motor skills and mobility.
- **SLP / ST** — Speech-Language Pathologist / Speech Therapy. A related service addressing communication, language, articulation, and related skills.
- **AT** — Assistive Technology. Devices or services that help a student with a disability access the curriculum or communicate — ranging from low-tech tools to sophisticated software.



Legal / Dispute Resolution

- **Due Process** — A formal legal hearing before an impartial hearing officer, used when parents and the school cannot resolve a disagreement about the child's education. One of the dispute resolution mechanisms guaranteed by IDEA.
- **Mediation** — A voluntary, confidential process in which parents and the school work with a trained neutral mediator to resolve disagreements — an alternative to due process.
- **OSEP** — Office of Special Education Programs. The federal office within the U.S. Department of Education responsible for administering IDEA and overseeing states' compliance.
- **ESY** — Extended School Year. Special education services provided beyond the regular school year for students whose IEP team determines they would otherwise experience significant regression.

Sources:

Center for Parent Information & Resources
Wrightslaw
Undivided
Understood
A Day in Our Shoes