KNOW THE TERMS

A special education glossary

Special education comes with a lot of acronyms and jargon. This glossary covers the terms you're most likely to hear in meetings and see in documents, explained in plain language.

The basics

IEP (Individualized Education Program)

A legally binding document that outlines your child's disability, current performance levels, annual goals, services, placement, and accommodations. It is reviewed and updated at least once per year.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)

The federal law that guarantees eligible students with disabilities the right to a free, appropriate public education and governs how special education works in the U.S.

FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education)

Your child's right to receive special education and related services at no cost to your family, designed to meet their unique needs.

IEP team

The group of people responsible for developing your child's IEP. Required members include you, your child's general and special education teachers, a district representative, and any relevant specialists.

Present levels (PLAAFP)

The section of the IEP that describes where your child is right now academically and functionally. Everything else in the IEP should build from this.

SDI (Specially Designed Instruction)

Instruction that is adapted in content, method, or delivery to meet your child's unique needs. This is what separates an IEP from a 504 plan.

Accommodation

A change in how your child accesses or demonstrates learning, without changing the standard. Examples include extended time, preferential seating, or larger print.

Modification

A change in what your child is expected to learn or produce. Examples include fewer test questions or an alternate assignment.

504 plan

A plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that provides accommodations for students with disabilities who do not qualify for an IEP. It does not include specially designed instruction.

LRE (Least Restrictive Environment)

The requirement that your child be educated alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate for them.

Services, evaluation, & your rights

Related services

Services that support your child's ability to benefit from special education, such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, or counseling.

ESY (Extended School Year)

Services provided beyond the regular school year for students who would experience significant regression without them. This is not the same as summer school.

Transition plan

A component of the IEP that outlines goals and services to support your child's move toward post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Required by age 16 under federal law. Many states start earlier (Virginia at 14, Illinois at 14½), so check your state's rules.

Eligibility

The determination of whether a student qualifies for special education services under one of the 13 disability categories defined by IDEA. It is an educational decision made by the team after an evaluation, separate from a medical diagnosis.

Evaluation

A comprehensive assessment to determine whether your child is eligible for special education. You must provide written consent before any evaluation takes place.

FBA (Functional Behavior Assessment)

An assessment used to understand why a behavior is occurring, so that an effective BIP can be developed.

BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan)

A written plan, typically attached to an IEP, that outlines strategies to address behaviors that interfere with your child's learning.

Prior Written Notice (PWN)

A written document the school must provide any time it proposes or refuses to take action related to your child's education. This is one of your most important documents: read it carefully.

Procedural safeguards

Your rights as a parent or legal guardian under IDEA. They cover consent through dispute resolution. The school must give you a copy once a school year, at your first request for an evaluation, the first complaint or due process filing in a year, a disciplinary removal that changes placement, and whenever you ask.

MY NOTES

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