



What is Prior Written Notice

A Blog – PWN & What You Should Know

Prior Written Notice: The Most Important Special Education Document You've Probably Never Heard Of

After her son's annual IEP meeting, Sarah felt encouraged. She had shared concerns about his continued struggles with reading and asked whether additional reading intervention could be added to his program. The team discussed the issue, asked a few questions, and moved on to other agenda items.

A few weeks later, Sarah received the finalized IEP. As she reviewed it, she realized no additional reading services had been added. More importantly, there was no explanation of why her request had been denied.

She was left wondering: Did the team consider my request? What information did they use to make their decision? Were other options discussed?

The answers to those questions should have been provided in a document many parents have never heard of: Prior Written Notice (PWN).

PWN is one of the most important procedural safeguards available to families, yet many parents are unaware of when they should receive it—or how valuable it can be.

What Is Prior Written Notice?

Procedural safeguards protect your right to meaningful participation in the decision-making process as an equal member of your child's IEP team. PWN is one of the most powerful procedural safeguards provided to parents under IDEA. It is written documentation of the school district's decisions and promotes transparency in the decision-making process.

A well-written PWN creates accountability for the decisions being made. It documents the district's reasoning, clarifies what was considered, approved, denied, or agreed to and helps prevent misunderstandings later in the IEP process.

Simply put, PWN answers the question: What did the district decide, and why?



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When Schools Must Provide It

The “prior” in the prior written notice can be misleading. You will typically receive this document after an IEP meeting, but before any changes to your child’s education are implemented.

There are many scenarios where PWN is required. One of the most important situations for parents to understand is that the school must provide PWN whenever it approves or denies a parent request that would result in a change to the student’s special education program, services, supports, evaluation, or placement.

Schools must also provide PWN whenever they propose or refuse to:

- Decide if your child is eligible for special education
- Evaluate your child or decline a requested evaluation
- Change your child’s eligibility category
- Change your child’s services, supports, or school placement
- Add, remove, modify or deny accommodations or supports
- Change your child’s educational program

Questions Every PWN Should Answer

Under IDEA, there are seven specific required components that every PWN must provide. But in essence, it should explain:

- What the district is proposing or refusing to do
- Why the decision was made
- What data was relied on to make the decision
- Other options that were considered and why they were rejected
- What parents can do if they disagree

In Sarah’s situation, a properly written PWN would have explained whether the request for additional reading intervention was approved or denied, what data the team relied upon, and what other options were considered.



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Why it Matters

As an advocate, I often tell families to document like they're going into dispute resolution—not because I expect them to, but because thorough documentation is one of the best ways to avoid it.

PWN can also help move conversations forward when the IEP team reaches an impasse. Rather than continuing to debate a request or decision, parents can ask the team to document its position in a PWN. Once the district's reasoning is clearly explained in writing, families are often in a better position to evaluate their options and determine next steps.

When requests, decisions, data, and reasoning are clearly documented, misunderstandings can often be resolved before they become larger disputes. And if disagreements do continue, everyone has a written record of what occurred and why.

You do not need to agree with every decision the team makes, but you should expect every important decision to be clearly explained in writing.

If a request, decision, or disagreement is important, ask for it in writing—and ask for it to be documented in the Prior Written Notice.

About the Author: Bonnie Klein is a non-attorney special education advocate and founder of Sierra Special Education Advocacy. She helps families navigate the IEP process and advocate effectively for students with disabilities. Bonnie also serves as an instructor for COPAA's Special Education Advocacy Training (SEAT) program. Learn more at SSEAdvocacy.com.