

Understanding 504 Plans and IEPs



NAVIGATING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

What is Section 504?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. This includes public schools. Its purpose is to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to education.

Key aspects of Section 504:

- Focus: Preventing discrimination and ensuring equal access.
- Eligibility: Any student with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more *major life activities* (e.g., learning, reading, walking, seeing, hearing, breathing, concentrating, thinking).
- Services: Provides accommodations to the learning environment to level the playing field. Examples include preferential seating, extended time on tests, and modified assignments.
- Funding: Schools are required to provide 504 plans regardless of additional funding; it's a *civil rights mandate*.

What is an IEP (Individualized Education Program)?

An IEP is a plan developed for students with disabilities who require specialized instruction to make progress in school. It is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that ensures students with specific disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Key aspects of an IEP:

- Focus: Providing specialized instruction and related services to address specific learning needs.
- Eligibility: Students with one of 13 specific disabilities listed in IDEA (e.g., specific learning disability, autism, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance) *and* whose disability adversely affects their educational performance, requiring specialized instruction.
- Services: Includes specialized instruction tailored to the student's needs, related services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, and transportation.
- Funding: IDEA provides federal funding to states to help support the provision of IEP services.

504 vs. IEP: Key Differences

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider eligibility criteria • Focuses on removing barriers and providing equal access • Provides accommodations • Less formal process • No specially designed instruction (SDI) is provided | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More specific eligibility criteria related to disability categories • Focuses on providing specialized instruction and related services to address learning needs • Provides individualized educational strategies • Requires a formal written plan with specific goals and objectives • Identifies there is a need for specially designed instruction (SDI) |
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Examples of who may qualify?

- Section 504: A student with asthma that requires an inhaler and extra time to get to class. A student with ADHD who needs preferential seating and reduced distractions.
- IEP: A student with a specific learning disability in reading who requires specialized reading instruction and support. A student with autism who needs support with social skills and communication.

Legal Protections

Both Section 504 and IDEA provide legal protections for students with disabilities. These include the right to:

- A free appropriate public education (FAPE).
- Non-discrimination.
- Evaluation.
- Parental involvement.
- Due process rights to resolve disputes.

Practical Examples

Scenario: A student with anxiety struggles to take tests in a large classroom setting.

- **504 Accommodation:** Allow the student to take tests in a smaller, quieter room.
- **Explanation:** This removes a barrier to access the curriculum by reducing anxiety during testing.
- **No specially designed instruction is required, just an accommodation.**

Scenario: A student with dyslexia struggles to decode words and read fluently.

- **IEP Intervention:** Provide specialized reading instruction using a research-based program, along with accommodations like audiobooks.
- **Explanation:** The student requires specially designed instruction to address their reading disability, in addition to accommodations to support their learning.

Next Steps

We are here to help you navigate the process and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. Our team of specialists is available to help walk you through these plans, and provide guidance as needed!