

The Advocacy Ridge

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PRESENTS

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS IN THE IEP

When the Grades Are Fine — But the Child Is Not

How to document, argue for, and protect social-emotional support in an IEP when the school says there's no problem

General educational information only — not legal advice. Universal guide — applicable in all states. State law may provide additional protections. For case-specific support, contact Mountain to Mountain Advocacy, LLC or The Disability Advocate, LLC.

Why This Guide Exists

One of the most common and most painful things a parent hears in an IEP meeting is: 'Academically, your child is doing well. We don't see a reason to change the plan.'

And you sit there knowing that your child spent forty-five minutes crying before school that morning. That they have no friends and eat lunch alone. That they come home every day and fall apart for hours because they have been holding everything together at school. That the anxiety is so severe they threw up three times this week. That the other kids don't understand them and they've stopped trying to explain. That they are surviving school — and that surviving and thriving are not the same thing.

This guide exists because IDEA does not say 'provide FAPE unless the child is passing classes.' IDEA requires that every eligible child receive an education designed to meet their unique educational needs — including social, emotional, and functional needs — regardless of academic performance. A child who is academically succeeding but socially isolated, emotionally dysregulated, or suffering significant anxiety at school is a child whose IEP is not addressing the full picture.

This guide gives you the legal framework, the language, the documentation strategy, and the specific IEP elements to demand when the school treats 'passing grades' as the end of the conversation.

⚠ IMPORTANT

The 'but they're doing well academically' response is not a legal conclusion. Academic performance alone is not sufficient to determine whether FAPE is being appropriately addressed. IDEA defines educational performance to include functional performance. Social-emotional functioning is functional performance. A child who cannot regulate, connect, or function without enormous daily cost is not fully accessing their education — regardless of their GPA.

Section 1 — The Legal Foundation

The legal case for social-emotional support in the IEP rests on several distinct foundations, each one potentially supporting the need for social-emotional supports when appropriately documented. Understanding each one gives you multiple angles of argument.

IDEA's Definition of Educational Performance Includes Functional Performance

LEGAL FOUNDATION — 34 CFR 300.320(a)(1) — PLAAFP Requirement

The IEP must include a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement AND functional performance. Functional performance is not academic performance. It includes behavioral, social, communication, adaptive, and emotional functioning. A PLAAFP that addresses only academics is an incomplete PLAAFP under federal law.

Functional performance is broad by design. It captures everything that affects how a child navigates their educational environment that isn't captured in reading scores and math tests. The inability to navigate peer relationships. The inability to regulate emotions in a classroom setting. The inability to ask for help. The inability to tolerate transitions or unexpected changes. These are functional deficits. They belong in the PLAAFP. These are functional deficits that may require IEP goals, services, accommodations, supports, or other intervention.

The Endrew F. Standard — Appropriately Ambitious for THIS Child

LEGAL FOUNDATION — Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 580 U.S. 386 (2017)

The Supreme Court held that FAPE requires an IEP that is 'appropriately ambitious in light of the child's circumstances.' For a student who is academically at or above grade level, the appropriate ambition standard applies to ALL domains of the IEP — including social and emotional functioning. An IEP that is ambitious academically but ignores documented social-emotional deficits is not appropriately ambitious in light of that child's circumstances.

Endrew F. changed the FAPE standard from 'some benefit' to 'appropriately ambitious.' For the academically successful child with significant social-emotional needs, this is one of the strongest legal arguments available. The child's circumstances include their social isolation, their anxiety, their emotional exhaustion. An IEP that ignores those circumstances is not meeting the Endrew F. standard.

IDEA Requires Consideration of Social-Emotional Needs

LEGAL FOUNDATION — 34 CFR 300.324(a)(2)(i) — Special Factors | 34 CFR 300.320(a)(3) — Annual Goals

When a student's behavior impedes their learning or the learning of others, the IEP team must consider positive behavioral interventions and supports. Additionally, IEP annual goals must address each of the child's educational needs resulting from the disability — not just academic needs. Social skills, emotional regulation, and self-advocacy are educational needs when the disability creates deficits in those areas.

Section 504 as a Parallel Framework

When a student does not qualify for IDEA services or when an existing IEP fails to address social-emotional needs, Section 504 provides an independent framework. Under 504, a student with a disability that substantially limits a major life activity — including interacting with others, caring for oneself, learning, or concentrating — is entitled to accommodations and modifications. Social-emotional accommodations can be written into a 504 plan even when a student is academically succeeding.

Important: Generally, social-emotional needs for a student with an IEP should be addressed within the IEP itself rather than requiring a separate Section 504 plan, as IDEA encompasses Section 504 protections and a student who qualifies under IDEA is also protected under Section 504. If disability-related social-emotional needs are documented but not appropriately addressed within the IEP, that may raise concerns regarding denial of FAPE under IDEA. If the IEP is inadequate and the team refuses to revise it to appropriately address those needs, requesting a 504 plan for unmet needs may be used as a parallel strategy, not a replacement for the district's IDEA obligations.

Section 2 — The 'Doing Well' Problem

Before we go further, it helps to understand exactly why schools use academic success as a reason to deny social-emotional support — and why that argument is legally and educationally wrong.

Why Schools Say It

- Academic performance is often easier to measure using existing school data systems, while social-emotional and functional needs can be more difficult to quantify and consistently monitor
- Some teams incorrectly associate FAPE primarily with academic progress and grades
- Some teams may lack sufficient social-emotional assessment data because those areas were never fully evaluated
- Schools are often more familiar and comfortable addressing academic remediation than directly teaching areas such as executive functioning, emotional regulation, self-advocacy, coping skills, or social communication
- Some districts lack sufficient staffing, training, or available providers in areas such as school social work, counseling, psychology, OT, behavior support, or autism-related supports
- Teams may incorrectly assume a student who is academically successful is not experiencing significant functional impact
- Social-emotional progress often requires more individualized and sophisticated data collection than traditional academic progress monitoring systems currently in place in many schools

Why It Is Wrong

IDEA does not use the word 'academic' in defining FAPE. It defines FAPE as special education and related services that meet the standards of the state educational agency and are provided in conformity with an IEP. An IEP that does not address documented functional needs — including social-emotional needs — is not a legally compliant IEP, regardless of whether the child is passing.

More practically: a child who is academically succeeding through daily emotional exhaustion, through social isolation that generates chronic anxiety, through coping strategies that are unsustainable, is not receiving an education that prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living. That is the explicit purpose of IDEA. Passing tests today while developing anxiety disorders, chronic avoidance, and no peer connection does not serve that purpose.

The Hidden Cost of Masking

Many children — particularly children with autism, ADHD, anxiety, and twice-exceptional profiles — learn to mask. They learn to suppress disability-related behaviors, manage their differences, and present as 'fine' in the school environment. The masking costs them enormously. The energy required to mask all day leaves nothing for learning, for connection, for recovery. The mask comes off at home, where parents see the real cost of a school day.

🚩 RED FLAG: When a teacher says 'I don't see any of that at school' in response to parent descriptions of social-emotional struggles — that is often a description of masking, not evidence that the struggle doesn't exist. A child who behaves perfectly at school and falls apart completely at home is a child whose school environment is demanding more than they can sustainably give. The masking itself may be important data indicating the level of effort, stress, or support required for the student to function within the school environment. Document it.

Emerging research and clinical literature specifically documents the long-term consequences of sustained masking and autistic burnout — increased anxiety, depression, loss of skills, and sometimes complete collapse in functioning. A student appearing regulated at school does not necessarily mean the student is not experiencing significant distress, effort, masking, anxiety, or dysregulation outside the school environment. Some students internalize emotions and distress in ways that are not easily observable to staff, particularly students with anxiety, autism, trauma histories, perfectionism, or high-masking profiles.

Because of this, it is important that teams not rely solely on adult observation when assessing or measuring social-emotional functioning. Student self-report, self-monitoring tools, rating scales, check-ins, counseling data, regulation tracking, and parent input may all be important components of understanding the student's actual functioning and measuring progress over time.

Section 3 — Documenting Social-Emotional Needs for the IEP

The most common reason social-emotional needs are dismissed in IEP meetings is that they aren't documented in a way the team can see and respond to. Academic needs generate test scores and grades. Social-emotional needs generate parent descriptions that feel subjective. Your job is to make the social-emotional need as concrete, measurable, and undeniable as any academic deficit.

What to Document — The Full Picture

School Functioning

- Peer interactions — how many peer relationships does the child have? How initiated? What is the quality? How often does the child eat lunch alone, sit alone at recess, choose to work alone?
- Social initiation — how often does the child initiate peer interaction versus wait, avoid, or withdraw?
- Social response — how does the child respond when peers initiate? Appropriately? With confusion? With withdrawal? With scripted or rigid responses?
- Adult relationships — does the child over-rely on adult relationship as a substitute for peer connection? Does the child seek out teachers or aides during unstructured time?
- Transitions — how does the child handle transitions, unexpected changes, disruptions to routine? Does it affect the rest of their day?
- Performance under pressure — does the child's academic performance drop significantly during evaluative situations? Does test anxiety affect results?

Home Functioning — The Real Cost of the School Day

- What does the child's emotional state look like when they arrive home? Immediate emotional dysregulation after school is a direct indicator of what the day cost them.
- The 'after-school unraveling' pattern — crying, meltdowns, shutdown, aggression, or regression in behavior that occurs specifically after school days
- Sleep — difficulty falling asleep due to school-related anxiety, nightmares, early waking with worry
- Physical complaints — stomach aches, headaches, complaints of illness specifically before school or on school days
- Refusal — any resistance to attending school, including complaints, delayed preparation, requests to stay home
- What the child says — direct quotes from the child about school, peers, how they feel during the day

Longitudinal Patterns

- How long has this been going on? A pattern that has persisted across multiple years and multiple teachers is not a situational response — it is a profile
- Has the child had any meaningful peer friendships in their school history? Any?
- Has the social-emotional picture gotten better, worse, or stayed the same over time?
- What have outside providers (therapists, psychiatrists, pediatricians) documented about the social-emotional picture?

How to Document It

Your Written Parent Input — One of the most Important documents

Before every IEP meeting, write a detailed parent input document that specifically describes social-emotional functioning. This is not a list of complaints. It is a functional description — observable, specific, as close to data as you can make it without being a clinician.

Example: 'In the past month, my child came home from school visibly dysregulated on 14 of 20 school days. Dysregulation lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours. Specific behaviors include crying, refusal to engage, and physical complaints. On 6 of those days, the child reported a specific social difficulty at school that day. On 4 days, no triggering event was identified. My child has not identified a single peer at school as a friend in the past two years.'

Specific. Dated. Observable. Quantified where possible. That is documentation that provides more concrete functional information for the team to consider.

Standardized Assessment Data

Request that the evaluation — or a new evaluation — include standardized social-emotional and behavioral assessment instruments. Common tools include:

- BASC-3 (Behavior Assessment System for Children) — includes teacher and parent rating scales and self-report forms measuring anxiety, depression, social skills, adaptability, and more
- Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales — measures socialization domain specifically, including interpersonal relationships, play and leisure, and coping skills
- BRIEF-2 (Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function) — measures emotional regulation as part of the executive function profile
- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-2) — specifically measures social communication and social awareness; particularly relevant for autism spectrum profiles
- SCARED (Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders) — a standardized anxiety screening measure
- SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) — a brief but validated measure of emotional and behavioral difficulties and prosocial behavior

If the district has not administered any of these instruments and the IEP does not address social-emotional functioning — request a comprehensive evaluation that includes them. The absence of data is not the same as an absence of need. Request assessment.

Outside Provider Documentation

A letter from an outside therapist, psychiatrist, psychologist, or pediatrician that specifically addresses the educational implications of the social-emotional picture is one of the most powerful documents you can bring to an IEP meeting. The letter should address:

- The clinical diagnosis and what it means for school functioning
- What the provider observes in treatment that is directly connected to the school environment
- Specific recommendations for school supports — what the school should provide, in the provider's clinical judgment
- The provider's opinion about whether the current school program adequately addresses the child's social-emotional needs

A letter that says 'student has anxiety' is less useful than a letter that says 'student presents with clinically significant anxiety related to social evaluation and peer interaction that affects their ability to initiate and maintain peer relationships, engage in group learning activities, and participate in non-structured school time. In my clinical judgment, the student requires direct social skills instruction and school-based counseling to address these needs.'

Section 4 — What the IEP Must Include for Social-Emotional Needs

Once social-emotional need is documented, the IEP must address it. Here is every element of the IEP that should reflect social-emotional functioning — and what each should contain.

The PLAAFP — Present Levels of Social-Emotional Functioning

The PLAAFP must describe social-emotional functioning in observable, specific, and measurable terms. Not 'student struggles with peer relationships' — but:

'During structured classroom activities, student participates appropriately. During unstructured times (lunch, recess, transitions), student consistently seeks adult company rather than peer interaction and has not initiated peer interaction in observed settings during the current school year. Teacher report indicates student eats alone 4 of 5 days per week. Parent report documents significant post-school emotional dysregulation occurring 3–4 days per week, average duration 1–2 hours, consistent with reports from the student's treating therapist.'

That PLAAFP creates a baseline from which goals can be written, progress can be measured, and a team cannot simply claim the student is doing fine.

RED FLAG: A PLAAFP that describes only academic performance for a child with documented social-emotional needs is an incomplete PLAAFP. It is a procedural deficiency under 34 CFR 300.320(a)(1). Document this in your parent concerns statement and follow up in writing after the meeting.

Annual Goals — What Social-Emotional Goals Look Like

Social-emotional IEP goals must be measurable. They must describe a skill the child will develop, a criterion for achievement, and a measurement method. Goals should focus on skill development and underlying needs rather than simple compliance-focused attendance and behavioral expectations. Here are examples across different need areas:

Peer Interaction and Social Initiation

- 'When in an unstructured school setting (lunch, recess, transitions), student will initiate a verbal or AAC-supported interaction with a peer on at least 3 of 5 observed opportunities per week, as measured by counselor or staff observation data over 4 consecutive weeks.'
- 'Student will identify and use at least 3 conversation entry strategies (e.g., commenting, asking a question, offering help) across 3 different peer settings, demonstrated in 4 of 5 weekly social skills sessions over a 6-week period.'

Emotional Regulation and Coping

- 'When experiencing identifiable signs of anxiety (identified in the student's regulation profile), student will independently access a pre-agreed coping strategy before reaching a dysregulation level of 4 or above on the self-monitoring scale, in 4 of 5 observed instances over 4 consecutive weeks.'
- 'Student will identify the physiological precursors to emotional escalation (e.g., heart rate change, muscle tension) and self-report them to a trusted adult or use a non-verbal signal, in 4 of 5 opportunities as measured by daily check-in data.'

Self-Advocacy

- 'Student will request a break, a support, or a clarification from a trusted adult using an agreed-upon method (verbal, signal card, or AAC) before reaching a point of behavioral dysregulation, in 4 of 5 measured weekly opportunities over 6 weeks.'
- 'Student will identify their own learning needs and communicate at least one accommodation or support need to a teacher or aide independently, demonstrated across 3 different teachers and 3 consecutive weeks.'

Anxiety Management

- 'When presented with an evaluative situation (test, oral presentation, performance task), student will apply a pre-taught cognitive coping strategy and complete the task at a self-reported anxiety level of 5 or below on a 10-point scale, in 4 of 5 opportunities over a 6-week data collection period.'
- 'Student will attend school for the full school day without requesting early dismissal due to anxiety-related physical complaints in 4 of 5 school days per week, across 4 consecutive weeks.'

Related Services — Counseling and Mental Health

School counseling and psychological services are explicitly listed as related services under IDEA (34 CFR 300.34). When a student has social-emotional needs that require direct intervention — not just accommodation — school counseling should be written into the IEP as a related service with a specific frequency, duration, and a named provider who is qualified to deliver it.

School counseling as an IEP service is different from general guidance counseling. It is:

- Delivered by a credentialed school counselor, school psychologist, or school social worker
- Tied to specific IEP goals — each session has a focus connected to the student's documented social-emotional needs
- Documented — session notes, attendance, progress toward goals
- Delivered consistently at the agreed frequency — not 'as available' or 'as needed'

IMPORTANT

'As needed' is not a service frequency. 'When requested' is not a service. When school counseling is an IEP-required service, it must have a specific frequency — 30 minutes per week, twice weekly, based on the student's individualized needs — and that frequency must be delivered. 'We have a counselor available if the student asks to see them' is not FAPE. It is the status quo that exists without any IEP.

Social Skills Instruction as Specially Designed Instruction

For students whose disability produces social skill deficits — particularly students with autism, ADHD, anxiety, learning disabilities, and hearing or language impairments — social skills instruction may be required as specially designed instruction (SDI), not just as a goal. SDI is instruction adapted in content, methodology, or delivery to address the unique needs of a student with a disability.

Evidence-based social skills curricula for school settings include:

- PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) — extensively researched, particularly for autism; addresses friendship skills, peer entry, handling teasing and rejection, social networking
- Social Thinking / We Thinkers — frameworks for understanding social cognition, perspective-taking, and social context
- Skillstreaming — structured learning approach for prosocial skills including the complete skill sequence: modeling, role-playing, feedback, generalization
- CBT-based social skills programs — particularly for anxiety-related social avoidance

The IEP should specify the curriculum or approach being used, the provider, the frequency, the setting (individual vs. small group — both have different purposes), and how generalization to natural settings will be supported.

Accommodations That Address Social-Emotional Needs

In addition to goals and services, the IEP accommodation section should specifically address social-emotional functioning. These accommodations reduce barriers without replacing direct skill instruction:

Emotional Safety and Regulation

- Access to a designated safe space within the school building — a specific location the student can use when dysregulation is building, without requiring explanation or permission
- A named trusted adult who is the student's designated support person — not whoever is nearest, but a specific person the student has a relationship with
- Break pass — access to a brief break on request or by staff prompt, without requiring verbal justification
- Self-monitoring tool — a visual or digital tool the student uses to track their own emotional state throughout the day
- Pre-notification of schedule changes, visitors, or anything that disrupts the expected routine — as far in advance as possible

Social Environment Accommodations

- Structured peer interaction opportunities — not just 'be with peers' but specific structured activities where social expectations are clear and supported
- Lunch or recess club — a structured optional activity during unstructured time that provides an alternative to the open social demands of the cafeteria or playground
- Assigned seating in cooperative learning activities that accounts for peer compatibility and reduces social anxiety
- Modified group work expectations when peer interaction creates significant anxiety — with a plan for building toward group participation over time

Transition and Flexibility

- Advance notice and preparation for transitions, assessments, and non-routine events
 - Additional transition time between activities — the first few minutes of each transition are high-anxiety moments
 - Flexible seating that allows the student to position themselves in lower-stimulation areas of the classroom
 - Option to enter and exit events (assemblies, performances, social gatherings) gradually rather than all at once
-

Section 5 — The Arguments Schools Make and How to Counter Them

These are the specific statements you are most likely to hear in an IEP meeting when you raise social-emotional needs for an academically successful student — and the specific, legally grounded responses to each.

'They're doing great academically — we don't see a reason to change the plan.'

Response: 'IDEA requires the IEP to address both academic achievement AND functional performance under 34 CFR 300.320(a)(1). I have documented specific functional deficits in social communication, emotional regulation, and peer relationship skills. These functional deficits are adversely affecting my child's educational performance even though academic scores are not affected. I am requesting that the PLAAFP be revised to reflect the documented functional needs and that goals and services be added to address them.'

'We can provide counseling as needed — they can go see the counselor anytime.'

Response: 'An open-ended 'as needed' support without clearly defined implementation parameters may not provide sufficient clarity regarding service delivery." Under IDEA, a related service requires a specific frequency, duration, and qualified provider documented in the IEP. An open-door counselor policy exists for every student in the building — it is not specially designed for my child and does not constitute FAPE. I am requesting that school counseling be written into the IEP with a specific frequency and goals tied to the documented social-emotional needs.'

'Social skills are part of growing up — they'll develop naturally.'

Response: Many students with disability-related social skill deficits benefit from or require direct instruction and support. IDEA requires that specially designed instruction address each of the child's unique educational needs resulting from the disability. Social skill deficits that result from this child's disability are educational needs — not developmental waiting periods. I am requesting social skills instruction as SDI.'

'We don't see those behaviors at school.'

Response: 'The absence of observable behaviors at school may indicate that my child is masking — using significant cognitive and emotional resources to suppress disability-related behaviors in the school environment. The cost of this masking appears at home, as I have documented. Research on autistic masking and school-based anxiety specifically documents that children who appear regulated at school are frequently experiencing significant distress that is not visible to school staff. I am requesting a comprehensive social-emotional evaluation that includes parent and teacher rating scales, self-report measures, and observation across settings, so that the full picture can be assessed.'

'We addressed social skills in the last IEP and it didn't seem to make a difference.'

Response: 'If a goal was in the last IEP and was not met, the team is required under 34 CFR 300.324(b) to consider revisions to address the lack of expected progress. I would like to understand: what was the specific instruction provided for the social skills goal? How frequently was it delivered? What data was collected? If a goal exists but instruction was not delivered or was ineffective, the appropriate response is to revise the instruction — not to remove the goal.'

'The student has outside therapy — the school doesn't need to duplicate services.'

Response: 'Outside therapy and school-based services address different environments and different needs. School-based counseling and social skills instruction addresses the school environment specifically — the peers, the settings, the demands of the school day. Outside therapy cannot replicate that context. Additionally, whether a family chooses to access or can access outside therapy does not reduce the school's FAPE obligation. The school's responsibility exists independently of what families are doing outside school hours.'

Section 6 — Autism Specifically Considerations That MAY Apply

For students with autism — including high-functioning or 'level 1' autism, previously called Asperger syndrome — some state or federal regulations include specific mandatory IEP considerations that directly address social-emotional needs. When autism is an eligibility category, these are not optional additions to the IEP. They can be legally required considerations.

LEGAL FOUNDATION — 34 CFR 300.324(a)(2)(i)

IDEA requires IEP teams to consider positive behavioral interventions and supports when behavior impedes learning. Depending on the student's individual needs, autism-related IEP considerations may also include social skills, communication/pragmatic language, sensory needs, adaptive functioning, behavioral supports, transition skills, community access, and Extended School Year (ESY).

The 'socially succeeding' autistic student is the student most likely to have these mandatory considerations skipped. Because they are verbal, because they are academically strong, because they appear socially engaged, teams skip the social skills consideration. But the child who is exhausted by every social interaction, who is masking constantly, who has one scripted social persona that works in structured settings but falls apart in unstructured ones — that child needs these considerations addressed.

At the IEP meeting, ask directly: 'Has the team documented its consideration of the student's autism-related needs in areas such as social skills, pragmatic language, sensory regulation, behavior supports, adaptive functioning, transition skills, and ESY where appropriate? I would like to see that documented in the IEP.'

Pragmatic Language — The Missing Assessment

Pragmatic language — the social use of language — is one of the most frequently unassessed and unaddressed areas for autistic students who are academically successful. A student can have an extensive vocabulary, read complex texts, write articulate essays, and still have profound pragmatic language deficits that affect every peer interaction.

Pragmatic language assessment should be part of any comprehensive evaluation for a student with autism or suspected autism. Instruments include the Social Communication Questionnaire, the Children's Communication Checklist, and pragmatic language subtests of comprehensive language batteries. If pragmatic language has never been assessed — request it.

And if pragmatic language deficits are documented — the speech-language IEP goals should specifically address pragmatic language: turn-taking in conversation, initiating and closing conversations, understanding figurative language and implied meaning, responding to nonverbal communication cues. Not vocabulary. Not grammar. The social use of language.

Section 7 — The Emotional Cost of Academic Success

This section is for you — the parent — as much as it is for the IEP team. Because one of the hardest parts of fighting for social-emotional support for an academically successful child is that you sometimes feel like you're asking too much. The school is telling you your child is doing fine. You can see the grades. And yet you know — you know in your bones — that this is not fine.

You are not imagining it. The research on what is sometimes called 'invisible disability' or 'high-masking' presentations is clear: children who succeed academically while experiencing significant social-emotional distress are at elevated risk for anxiety disorders, depression, burnout, and in some populations, can even lead to suicidality — not despite their academic success, but in part because of it. The very intelligence and adaptive capacity that allows them to succeed academically is the same capacity that produces exhausting masking, perfectionism, and the relentless effort to appear normal.

The research on autistic burnout is particularly stark. Autistic young people who 'seemed fine' in school — who were academically successful, who had learned to mask effectively — frequently experience significant to catastrophic burnout in late high school, early college, or early adulthood when the demands finally exceed their capacity. The social-emotional supports that were not provided in school show up as crises in adulthood.

The goal of IDEA is not to get students through school. The goal is to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. A child who reaches graduation with strong academics but without meaningful social-emotional support, regulation skills, self-advocacy skills, or peer connection may still be inadequately prepared for further education, employment, and independent living.

You are not asking for too much. You are asking for what the law requires. You are asking for what your child needs. And you are asking before the cost becomes a crisis. That is not excessive. That is exactly what an advocate is supposed to do.

Section 8 — Quick Reference: What to Ask for at the IEP Meeting

IN THE PLAAF — ADVOCATE FOR THIS LANGUAGE

- A specific description of peer relationship status — frequency of peer interaction, quality, unstructured time behavior
- A specific description of emotional regulation — what triggers dysregulation, what it looks like, how long it lasts, what supports help
- A specific description of self-advocacy — whether and how the student communicates needs and distress
- Parent report of home functioning — the after-school picture, not just the in-school picture
- Outside provider data referenced and connected to school functioning

IN ANNUAL GOALS — ADVOCATE FOR THIS FOCUS

- At least one goal addressing peer interaction or social communication
- At least one goal addressing emotional regulation and coping strategy use
- At least one goal addressing self-advocacy
- Each goal with a specific measurable criterion — not 'student will improve social skills'
- Each goal with a specific data collection method — not 'teacher observation' alone without a data log

IN SERVICES — ADVOCATE THIS SPECIFICITY

- School counseling as a related service — specific frequency and duration, not 'as needed'
- Social skills instruction as SDI — specific curriculum or approach named, qualified provider identified
- For autism — documentation that all 7 important autism-related IEP considerations were addressed

IN ACCOMMODATIONS — ADVOCATE THESE SPECIFICALLY

- Named trusted adult and safe space
- Break access on request — without justification required
- Pre-notification of schedule changes and non-routine events
- Structured peer interaction opportunities during unstructured time
- Self-monitoring tool if appropriate

IN WRITING — SEND THIS AFTER THE MEETING

- Follow-up email confirming what was agreed and what was not
- If social-emotional needs were dismissed — cite 34 CFR 300.320(a)(1) and 34 CFR 300.324(a)(2)(i) in writing
- Request Prior Written Notice of any decision to deny social-emotional services
- If PWN is refused or deficient — escalate to state complaint

Need Advocacy Support?

The Advocacy Ridge is brought to you by experienced non-attorney special education advocates who work with families across multiple states.

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