

SUPPORT FOR NEURODIVERGENT LEARNERS

A Brief History

For most of American educational history, students who learned differently had no legal right to support at all. A child with a disability could be, and often was, simply turned away from public school. That began to change in 1975, when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, guaranteeing for the first time that every child, regardless of disability, had the right to a free, appropriate public education.

That law was renamed and expanded in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which remains the backbone of special education today. Alongside it, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, originally a broad civil rights law, became an important second pathway to support, covering students whose disability doesn't require specialized instruction but does require accommodations to access the same education as their peers.

The past fifteen years have brought a significant, if uneven, shift toward inclusion: educating neurodivergent students alongside their peers in general education classrooms whenever possible, rather than in separate settings by default. At the same time, growing recognition of conditions like ADHD, dyslexia, and anxiety has driven a sharp rise in students receiving 504 plans specifically, even as many neurodivergent students remain unidentified and unsupported altogether.

What Support Looks Like

Support for neurodivergent learners generally falls into two legal categories. An Individualized Education Program (IEP), created under IDEA, provides specialized instruction tailored to a student's specific disability, along with legally binding goals and progress tracking. A 504 Plan, created under Section 504, provides accommodations, such as extended time, preferential seating, or assistive technology, that remove barriers to accessing the general curriculum, without providing specialized instruction itself.

Beyond these formal legal frameworks, effective support also includes everyday classroom practices that benefit neurodivergent students whether or not they have a formal plan: flexible seating, visual schedules, multiple ways to demonstrate understanding, and a teacher's basic assumption that a struggling student is trying, not being difficult.

Good support is never one-size-fits-all. The right combination of accommodations, instruction, and understanding looks different for every neurodivergent learner, and it typically works best when built collaboratively among teachers, families, and, whenever appropriate, the student themselves.

Understanding the Scope

- More than 7.5 million U.S. students receive special education services under IDEA, representing about 14% of the nation's roughly 50 million public school students.
- An additional 3 to 4% of students are supported through Section 504 plans, a rate that has nearly quadrupled over the past fifteen years as awareness of ADHD, dyslexia, and anxiety has grown.
- Even combined, IEPs and 504 plans reach nowhere near the estimated 15 to 20% of students believed to be neurodivergent, meaning millions of students who learn and think differently are likely going unidentified and unsupported.
- More than half (54%) of students in special education are served specifically under the learning disability or "other health impairment" categories, the classifications that typically cover dyslexia, dyscalculia, and ADHD.
- About 1 in 3 students with an IEP for a learning disability or ADHD has repeated a grade at least once, underscoring how much is at stake when support arrives too late.
- Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended as their peers, a pattern that often reflects behavior stemming from unmet needs rather than defiance.

Strategies for Teachers

- Read the IEP or 504 plan yourself, in full, rather than relying on a secondhand summary. The specific accommodations listed are there because a team decided they were necessary.
- Build flexible practices into your default teaching, not just your accommodated one: multiple ways to access content, multiple ways to show understanding, and built-in movement or breaks.
- Loop in the case manager or support team early when something isn't working, rather than waiting for a formal review. Small adjustments made quickly prevent bigger problems later.
- Assume competence and good intent first. A student who's off task, refusing work, or melting down is almost always communicating an unmet need, not a lack of character.
- Document what you observe, in specific and factual terms. Your classroom observations are valuable evidence in a student's ongoing evaluation and support plan.

Strategies for Parents

- Request a formal evaluation in writing if you suspect your child needs support; a written request starts the legal clock and creates a paper trail.
- Learn the difference between an IEP and a 504 plan before your first meeting, so you can advocate for the right fit rather than whichever option is offered first.
- Bring outside evaluations, doctor's notes, or private testing to school meetings. Schools aren't required to accept them outright, but they carry real weight in the conversation.
- Keep a simple, organized file of evaluations, plans, and email communication. It becomes invaluable if you ever need to advocate for a change or dispute a decision.
- Remember you are a legal, equal member of your child's IEP or 504 team, not a guest at the table. Your observations from home are evidence, not just anecdotes.

Strategies for Grandparents

- Understand that a formal plan (an IEP or 504) isn't a sign of a struggling family; it's a legal tool that guarantees your grandchild gets what they're entitled to.
- Ask the parents what's in the plan and how you can reinforce it at home, especially routines, communication methods, or accommodations that help your grandchild succeed.
- Offer to attend a school meeting if invited, or simply ask thoughtful questions afterward. Extra support and advocacy, even from the sidelines, matters enormously to a parent navigating this system.
- Avoid comparing your grandchild's need for support to "how things were done" in an earlier generation; the legal right to this kind of support is a relatively recent and hard-won protection.
- Celebrate the wins along the way, even small ones. A successful accommodation or a good week at school is real progress worth acknowledging.

Florida & Brevard County Context

- Florida's Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities (FES-UA), which absorbed the former McKay Scholarship in 2022, lets eligible families direct state funds toward private school tuition, therapies, and approved services, an option beyond the traditional IEP or 504 path.
- In Brevard County, a school may not exceed 22% ESE enrollment (excluding gifted students) under district policy, a cap worth knowing about if a family is considering a school transfer or open enrollment request.
- Brevard Public Schools' Exceptional Student Education department, led by Dr. Patricia Fontan, is the district's central point of contact for evaluations, IEP and 504 questions, and connecting families to support specialists.
- GiFT for Educators partners directly with Brevard Public Schools and works alongside families navigating the evaluation and support process, in addition to offering free educator training on neurodiversity-affirming classroom practice.