

504 Plan Versus IEP: A Guide for Parents

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There are two major tools educators use to help children with learning differences, and parents should know the difference.



The purpose of an IEP depends on a student’s needs. The process starts with a meeting with school officials to determine whether a child is eligible. If they qualify, parents and educators develop a detailed written description of a child’s educational program.(Getty Images)

If you’re confused about whether your child needs a 504 plan or an IEP, you’re not alone. The world of accommodations and support for learning differences can be confusing.

But federal law provides a great deal for public school students who need help, and two important pieces of that system – and terms parents are likely to hear – are a 504 plan and an Individualized Education Program, or IEP. Both are programs that allow students with learning difficulties to receive help, if they qualify.

A 504 plan provides equal access to education for people with disabilities, and it focuses on accommodations like the ability to leave the classroom or additional time to take a test. It falls under anti-discrimination laws and is usually much less involved than an IEP.

The [Individualized Education Program](#) was created by special education law, and it also provides equal access for people with disabilities. Its goal is to ensure students are progressing educationally and is therefore more structured and specific than a 504 and requires documentation of measurable growth.

“It’s not something a parent can choose,” says Morgan Brittingham, an elementary school learning support specialist. “Students go through a process of qualifying for services. But it’s good for a parent to know the difference and which supports their student might need.”

504 Plan Versus IEP

Education experts say that the first step is always determining what a child needs.

“It’s best for parents to figure out what their kids’ strengths and challenges are, what they need and how to get it,” says Rich Weinfeld, executive director of Weinfeld Education Group, which helps families navigate special education. “Getting it could be through a 504 plan, it could be through an IEP, or it could be neither. They are different vehicles, and each one is appropriate in certain situations.”

Weinfeld, who has authored several books on education for children with learning differences, uses several questions to help parents navigate the system and request help for their children.

- Does my child have a disability that is impacting their education in any way, including academically (reading, writing, math) or functionally (executive skills, social skills, coping skills)?
- Does my child only need accommodations that provide them with equitable access to instruction, such as preferential seating or extended time on tests? If yes, request a 504 plan in writing.
- Does my child also need to be taught strategies and skills to make progress in school? If yes, request an IEP in writing.

In a public school, written requests begin the process of evaluation and start the clock on decisions that require a timely response from educators.

The Utility of a 504 Plan

Named after Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 504 plans are designed to eliminate discrimination in programs that receive federal funds, such as public school districts.

Education experts say 504s “level the playing field” so that disabled students can participate in school and extracurricular activities. A 504 plan, [for example](#), may require [classroom](#) and testing accommodations, such as large-print copies of a test or a printed copy of spoken directions. A 504 plan is also generally a short document, while an [IEP](#) is often much longer.

Stephanie Taylor, clinical director of psychoeducational services at PresenceLearning, which provides services related to special education, offers an example to explain how a 504 plan and an IEP may be used to help students who have different needs.

“Let’s say you have two students, both with ADHD and a reading disability,” she says. “Does the diagnosis negatively impact their education? Student A is in the fifth grade but reading at a second-grade reading level. ... Because they are not at grade level, they would need specially-designed instruction in reading to get caught up. That’s a clear case for an IEP.”

The other student in this example, who has a similar diagnosis, may present a different scenario when it comes to support. “This student is reading at grade level, but their behaviors are negatively impacting their ability to stay in the classroom,” Taylor says. “Maybe they are disruptive, or they get easily frustrated then shut down. ... Student B doesn’t need to go to the special education teacher because

they are at grade level in their reading. For that student, it would most likely be a good move to put them on a 504.”

Weinfeld says a 504 plan is often used to help children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

“A typical 504 plan for a kid with ADHD is going to include what the general-education teacher can do,” he says. “Seat them in the front row; frequent reminders or signals to pay attention; extended time to complete an assignment because they may get distracted and not remember to do all the parts. ... These are all accommodations. We’re not teaching that kid any new skills. We’re just ‘leveling the playing field.’”

The IEP Process

The IEP process is based on eligibility requirements established by the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), commonly known as IDEA. To be eligible, a child must fit under at least one of [13 disability categories](#) listed in the act. A disability must significantly and adversely affect a child’s ability to demonstrate academic achievement.

The law protects the rights of students with disabilities to receive a public school education, specifically a “free and appropriate education” in the least restrictive environment. If a child can make academic progress in a general education setting with support, educators will generally favor that path. Each state also has its own guidelines.

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Experts in special education diagnosis will typically test a child’s IQ as well as motor skills, language and behavior. When the school has a diagnosis and more information, they can begin to put supports into place. As the document is being created, parents and teachers will discuss the child’s strengths, health and current performance. Goals will be established, as will any need for assistive technology or accommodations, including supports for teachers and assessments to track everything.

Whatever the path to support, experts say that parents can be strong advocates for their children and work with educators to find the right solution.

“Parents can think, ‘What is the goal here?’” Taylor says. “Parents can become educated on what the potential outcomes are, and what the different routes are to get to where they want to go. If a school doesn’t ask them that, I think they should ask the school. That’s a good thing.”

Resources for Parents

For parents who want to learn more about the support that is available for children with learning differences, here are some resources:

- The [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#) has information and resources on 504 Plans, IEPs and the laws that apply.
- The [U.S. Department of Education](#) has an FAQ on the federal law that governs 504 Plans.
- [Understood](#), a nonprofit dedicated to providing parents with credible information about learning differences, offers a comparative analysis of 504 Plans and IEPs.

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