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Special Education Acronyms & Terminology Guide

Empowering IEP Teams. Advocating for Student Success.

Why This Guide Matters

Walking into an IEP meeting can feel like learning a new language. This guide explains common special education acronyms and terminology in plain language so parents, educators, and other IEP team members can participate with greater confidence and understanding.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is organized alphabetically and includes many of the most common special education acronyms and terms used in evaluations, eligibility meetings, IEP meetings, and school communications. Use it as a quick-reference resource whenever you encounter unfamiliar language or educational jargon.
Whether you are a parent, educator, service provider, advocate, or administrator, understanding these terms can help you participate more confidently and effectively in the special education process.

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504 Plan
A written plan developed under Section 504 that outlines accommodations, supports, and services to ensure a student with a disability has equal access to education.

Accommodation
A change in how a student learns, accesses instruction, demonstrates knowledge, or participates in school activities without changing grade-level learning expectations.

ADA
Americans with Disabilities Act
A federal civil rights law that protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination in schools, employment, public services, transportation, and community settings.

Annual Review
A yearly IEP meeting held to review a student's progress, update goals, and determine whether changes to services or supports are needed.

⭐ Reach for the Stars Tip ⭐
An IEP and a 504 Plan are not the same. An IEP provides specialized instruction and services under IDEA, while a 504 Plan provides accommodations under Section 504.

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ARC / ARD
Admissions and Release Committee (ARC) or Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD)
Terms used in some states to describe the team responsible for developing, reviewing, and revising a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). In many states, this group is simply referred to as the IEP Team.

AT
Assistive Technology
Devices, equipment, software, or services that help a student increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities needed for learning and participation.

BIP
Behavior Intervention Plan
A written plan developed to address behaviors that interfere with a student's learning or the learning of others. A BIP identifies the purpose of the behavior and outlines strategies, supports, and interventions to help the student be successful.

Child Find
A federal requirement under IDEA that requires schools to identify, locate, and evaluate students who may have disabilities and need special education services.

Consent
Written permission provided by a parent or eligible student before a school can conduct certain actions, such as evaluations or changes to special education services.

Continuum of Services
The range of special education supports and placement options available to meet a student's unique needs, from general education with supports to more specialized settings.

DD
Developmental Delay
A disability category used for young children who demonstrate delays in one or more developmental areas, such as communication, motor skills, cognition, social-emotional development, or adaptive skills.

Dispute Resolution
Processes available to help resolve disagreements between families and schools regarding special education services, including mediation, state complaints, and due process hearings.

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Due Process
A formal legal procedure used to resolve disputes between families and schools regarding identification, evaluation, eligibility, placement, or the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

EI
Early Intervention
Services and supports provided to infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities, typically from birth through age three.

Eligibility
The process of determining whether a student meets the criteria for one or more disability categories and requires special education services under IDEA.

ESY
Extended School Year
Special education services provided beyond the regular school year when necessary for a student to receive FAPE and maintain critical skills.

Evaluation
A comprehensive assessment process used to gather information about a student's strengths, needs, and eligibility for special education services.

FAPE
Free Appropriate Public Education
A student's right under IDEA to receive special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs at no cost to the family.

FBA
Functional Behavior Assessment
A process used to identify the purpose or function of a student's behavior. An FBA helps the team understand why a behavior is occurring and guides the development of effective supports and interventions.

⭐ Reach for the Stars Tip ⭐
Eligibility is not based solely on a diagnosis. A student must meet the criteria for a disability category and demonstrate a need for specialized instruction in order to qualify for special education services.

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FERPA
Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
A federal law that protects the privacy of student education records and gives parents certain rights regarding access to those records.

Functional Performance
A student's skills and abilities in everyday activities such as communication, behavior, social interactions, organization, self-care, and independent living.

General Education
The standard educational program provided to all students that serves as the starting point for determining appropriate supports and services.

Goal (Annual Goal)
A measurable statement in an IEP that describes what a student is expected to achieve within a year.

IDEA
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
The federal law that guarantees eligible students with disabilities the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and outlines special education requirements for schools.

IEE
Independent Educational Evaluation
An evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the school district. Parents may request an IEE if they disagree with a school's evaluation.

IEP
Individualized Education Program
A written plan developed for a student who qualifies for special education services. The IEP outlines the student's present levels, goals, services, accommodations, and supports.

IFSP
Individualized Family Service Plan
A written plan for infants and toddlers (birth through age three) who qualify for early intervention services. The IFSP outlines the child's needs, family priorities, and services designed to support development.

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Inclusion
The practice of educating students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

LRE
Least Restrictive Environment
The requirement that students with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate while still meeting their individual needs.

Manifestation Determination Review
A meeting held when a student with a disability faces a disciplinary change of placement. The team determines whether the behavior was caused by, or directly related to, the student's disability.

Mediation
A voluntary dispute-resolution process in which a neutral third party helps families and schools work toward a mutually acceptable agreement.

Modification
A change to what a student is expected to learn or demonstrate. Unlike accommodations, modifications alter the instructional expectations or standards.

MTSS
Multi-Tiered System of Supports
A framework used to provide academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support at increasing levels of intensity based on student need.

OT
Occupational Therapy
A related service that helps students develop skills needed for school participation and daily activities, such as fine motor skills, sensory regulation, handwriting, self-care, and organization.

PLAAFP
Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance
The section of the IEP that describes a student's current strengths, needs, and performance levels. It serves as the foundation for goals, services, accommodations, and supports.

⭐ Reach for the Stars Tip ⭐
Accommodations change how a student learns. Modifications change what a student is expected to learn. Understanding the difference can help IEP teams make informed decisions about supports and services.

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Placement
The educational setting where a student receives services, determined by the IEP team based on the student's individual needs and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Procedural Safeguards
Legal protections designed to ensure that parents and students have rights throughout the special education process, including dispute-resolution options and access to educational records.

Progress Monitoring
The ongoing collection and review of data used to determine whether a student is making expected progress toward educational goals and responding to interventions or services.

PT
Physical Therapy
A related service that helps students improve mobility, balance, coordination, strength, and physical access to the school environment.

PWN
Prior Written Notice
A written notice that schools must provide before proposing or refusing to initiate or change a student's identification, evaluation, educational placement, or special education services.

Reevaluation
A review conducted at least every three years, or more often if needed, to determine whether a student continues to qualify for special education services and to identify current educational needs.

Referral
A formal request to evaluate a student who may have a disability and need special education services. Referrals may be made by parents, educators, or others familiar with the student's needs.

Related Services
Support services required to help a student benefit from special education, such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, counseling, transportation, and other specialized supports.

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RTI
Response to Intervention
A multi-tiered approach used to identify and support students who are struggling academically or behaviorally through increasingly intensive interventions.

SDI
Specially Designed Instruction
Instruction that is adapted in content, methodology, or delivery to address a student's unique disability-related needs and help them make progress in the general education curriculum.

Section 504
A federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal funding.

Service Minutes
The amount of time a student receives special education instruction, related services, or other supports as documented in the IEP. Service minutes should be based on the student's individual needs and the amount of specialized instruction or support required for the student to make progress toward their IEP goals.

Special Education
Specialized instruction designed to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability. Special education may include specially designed instruction, related services, accommodations, modifications, and supports.

SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist
A professional who evaluates and provides services to support communication, language, speech, voice, fluency, and related skills.

Speech-Language Services
Related services that help students develop communication skills necessary for educational success.

⭐ Reach for the Stars Tip ⭐

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) is the foundation of special education and one of the key differences between an IEP and a 504 Plan. If a student requires SDI to make educational progress, they may qualify for an IEP under IDEA. Service minutes should be based on the amount of SDI and related services a student needs to make meaningful progress toward their goals, not on staffing, schedules, budgets, or program availability.

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Supplemental Aids and Services
Supports, accommodations, services, and other assistance provided to help students with disabilities participate in educational settings alongside their nondisabled peers.

Transition Assessment
An ongoing process used to identify a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs as they prepare for life after high school.

Transition Plan
A section of the IEP that outlines goals, services, and activities to help a student prepare for life after high school, including education, employment, independent living, and community participation.

Transition Services
Coordinated activities designed to help students move from school to postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation.

UDL
Universal Design for Learning
A framework for designing instruction that provides multiple ways for students to access information, engage in learning, and demonstrate what they know.

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