

Parents' guide to 504 plans and IEPs: What they are and how they're different

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Alison Yin for EdSource

Each year, a greater percentage of students in California qualify for special education. Last year, about 13% of students in California's K-12 public schools received individualized services for special needs, up from about 10% in the early 2000s. Navigating the special education landscape can be daunting for parents trying to get the best

education for their children. Here's a guide to Individualized Education Programs, 504 plans and other aspects of special education.

What is an IEP?

An IEP is an [individualized education program](#), an educational road map for children with disabilities. Required by the federal [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), an IEP is a regularly updated document that outlines goals and milestones for students based on their unique abilities. IEPs are created by teachers, parents, school administrators, other school staff such as psychologists, and sometimes students themselves. All students in special education have IEPs.

In California, about 800,000 students, or 13%, have IEPs. Students with IEPs can have autism, intellectual disabilities, orthopedic impairments, brain injuries, deafness, vision impairments, speech or language impairments or [other disabilities](#) that require specialized help with school.

What is a 504 plan?

"504 plan" refers to section 504 of the [U.S. Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#), which states that any organization, including a school, that receives federal money cannot discriminate against people with disabilities. At schools, this can mean

that students with learning disabilities, for example, can get extra time to take tests or finish homework, sit near the front of the classroom, or use textbooks in formats they can understand, such as audiobooks. A team of teachers, specialists and parents determines what accommodations a student receives under their 504 plan.

In general, the goal of a 504 plan is to accommodate students with disabilities in general education classrooms. About 85,100 students in California, or about 1.5%, have 504 plans, according to the Department of Education's [Office of Civil Rights](#).

What's the difference?

A 504 plan is geared toward ensuring a student has equitable access to a learning environment. An IEP focuses on educational benefits, and often includes direct services such as speech or occupational therapy. Both are free. Some students have both, and some just have one or the other. 504 plans are typically available to students with a broader range of disabilities, including attention deficit disorders. IEPs are available to students with one [13 specific criteria](#) such as orthopedic impairments or intellectual disabilities.

What's the advantage to having a 504 or IEP?

IEPs or 504 plans can help a student with disabilities – from minor learning disabilities to profound physical, emotional or intellectual impairments – succeed in school and beyond.

Special education services can include physical, occupational, speech or behavioral therapy; one-on-one help from a tutor or aide; or instruction from special education teachers who are trained to work with students with unique needs. Students in special education may spend the majority of their day in general education classrooms and can receive their specialized services there, or they may spend their entire day in a special ed classroom, depending on their needs. Most school districts try to include disabled students in classes with their nondisabled peers as much as possible, in accordance with federal law.

A 504 plan can help a student thrive in a general education classroom with minimal disruption in their education, and it can be tailored to each education environment, such as art class or P.E., that the student experiences throughout the day.

How do I know if my child needs a 504 or IEP?

Schools will evaluate a student to determine whether they qualify for an IEP or 504 plan. Parents can pay for private evaluations, although schools aren't required to adopt

recommendations that come from private reports.

To get an IEP plan, a student's disability must interfere with their ability to fully benefit from the general education curriculum, meaning that they need specialized instruction. To get a 504 plan, a student's disability must hinder their ability to learn in a general education classroom without accommodations.

What if I disagree with the school's decision?

If a school decides a child is not eligible for an IEP plan but parents believe the child should have one, or if a parent disagrees with the services a school is providing, there are many options to resolve disagreements. Special Education Local Plan Areas have staff specially trained to resolve disputes and help families communicate with schools.

Parents can also talk to an advocacy group such as [Support for Families of Children with Disabilities](#), [Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund](#), [Fiesta Educativa](#) or [other groups](#) that help parents navigate the special education system in California.

How can I learn more?

The California Department of Education's [special education division](#) includes information about parents' rights, data collection, policies and other information for families,

teachers and students. School districts, county offices of education and [Special Education Local Area Plans](#), which oversee special education in multiple school districts, can also provide help for parents. The [California Department of Developmental Services](#) and the [California Department of Health Care Services](#), both state agencies, and [Disability Rights California](#), a nonprofit advocacy group, also have resources for children, families and adults with disabilities. The [SELPA Administrators of California](#) also offers a host of resources for parents.

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