



# Special Education

Ten Tips for Advocating for Your Child

April 2, 2025





## About this presentation

This presentation is part of a series of workshops we are doing this spring as part of the [Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network](#).

This is a statewide collaboration between the [Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction](#), WestEd, and education partners across Washington state.

One of these partners is the [Family Engagement Collaborative](#), and The Arc of King County is part of this collaborative. This spring we are hosting workshops to help educators learn more about disability and ways to support families, and help families learn more about inclusive learning and ways to navigate the special education process.



# NAVIGATING SCHOOLS



Accessibility & Belonging

Special Education Basics

Conceptos básicos de educación especial

A series for families using special education services.



Produced by The Arc of King County for the state's Inclusionary Practices Technical Network.





# Who we are ...

The Arc of King County promotes and protects the rights of people with intellectual or other developmental disabilities (IDD) so we can all live, learn, work and play in the community.

The Arc is driven by the fundamental belief that everyone deserves to write their own life story. That means:

- Real access to education
- Meaningful employment
- Quality healthcare
- Genuine community connections

At our chapter, we offer information and family support, systems navigation, education & civic engagement support. We also run a supported living program for adults with IDD.

We help (or refer!) on any topic. The most common are special education, housing, and Medicaid long-term supports.

<https://arcofkingcounty.org/>



Need assistance? [ask@arcofkingcounty.org](mailto:ask@arcofkingcounty.org)

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# Welcome!

We would love to know who is here today!

Please take a minute to tell us your role/s.



# Today we will cover (as time allows):

- The legal basics
- What is an IEP?
- IEP vs. 504 Plans
- Evaluations and the IEP Process
- Data, goal writing and PLPs
- Inclusion and placement decisions
- Challenging behaviors
- The Advocacy Hierarchy
- Options for conflict resolutions
- Working with the IEP team





# 1. Understand the legal basics



## Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 established civil rights for students with disabilities. It requires reasonable accommodations as necessary for each student to be able to access their education.

## Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA)

A federal law that guarantees a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for eligible children and youth with disabilities. Was last amended in 2015.

## Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

According to the IDEA and in accordance with FAPE, LRE commonly refers to removing a student from the general education environment *as little as possible* by providing specially designed instruction and supplementary aids and services in the gen-ed classroom to the maximum extent appropriate for the student.



A child with a disability has a right to an education with his general education peers and is entitled to make substantial progress in his or her learning. Challenging and aggressive behavior, complex medical needs, *an international pandemic*, or unique learning requirements do not diminish those rights in any way.

## 2. Know what an IEP is

### **Individualized Education Program (IEP):**

A legally binding contract that lays out the specialized instruction, supports, and services a student needs to make progress and thrive in school. A parent is an equal member of the IEP team. Parents have the right to request a meeting at any time.

### **All IEPs look different, but all should include the following:**

- ✓ Present Levels of Performance
- ✓ Annual goals
- ✓ Specialized education and related services, including supplementary aids and services
- ✓ Accommodations
- ✓ How much of the school day the child will be educated away from their nondisabled peers
- ✓ How often services will be provided, where they will be provided, how long they'll last (service matrix)





### 3. Know the difference between IEPs and 504 plans



**Individualized Education Program (IEP):** Will include accommodations, along with goals, service matrix and more

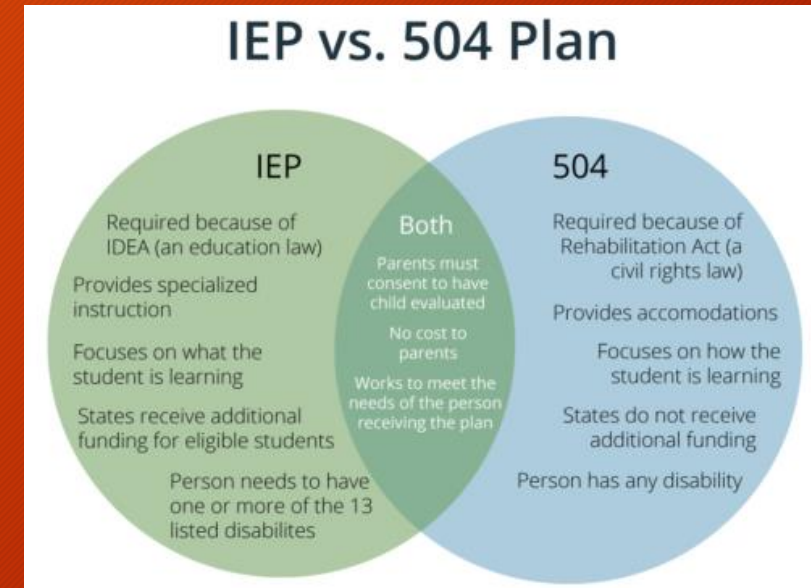


**Modifications** are changes to the general education curriculum, will only appear on an IEP, and will change WHAT is being taught or learned.

**504 plan:** a blueprint for how the school will support a student with a disability and remove barriers to learning. The goal is to give the student equal access at school.



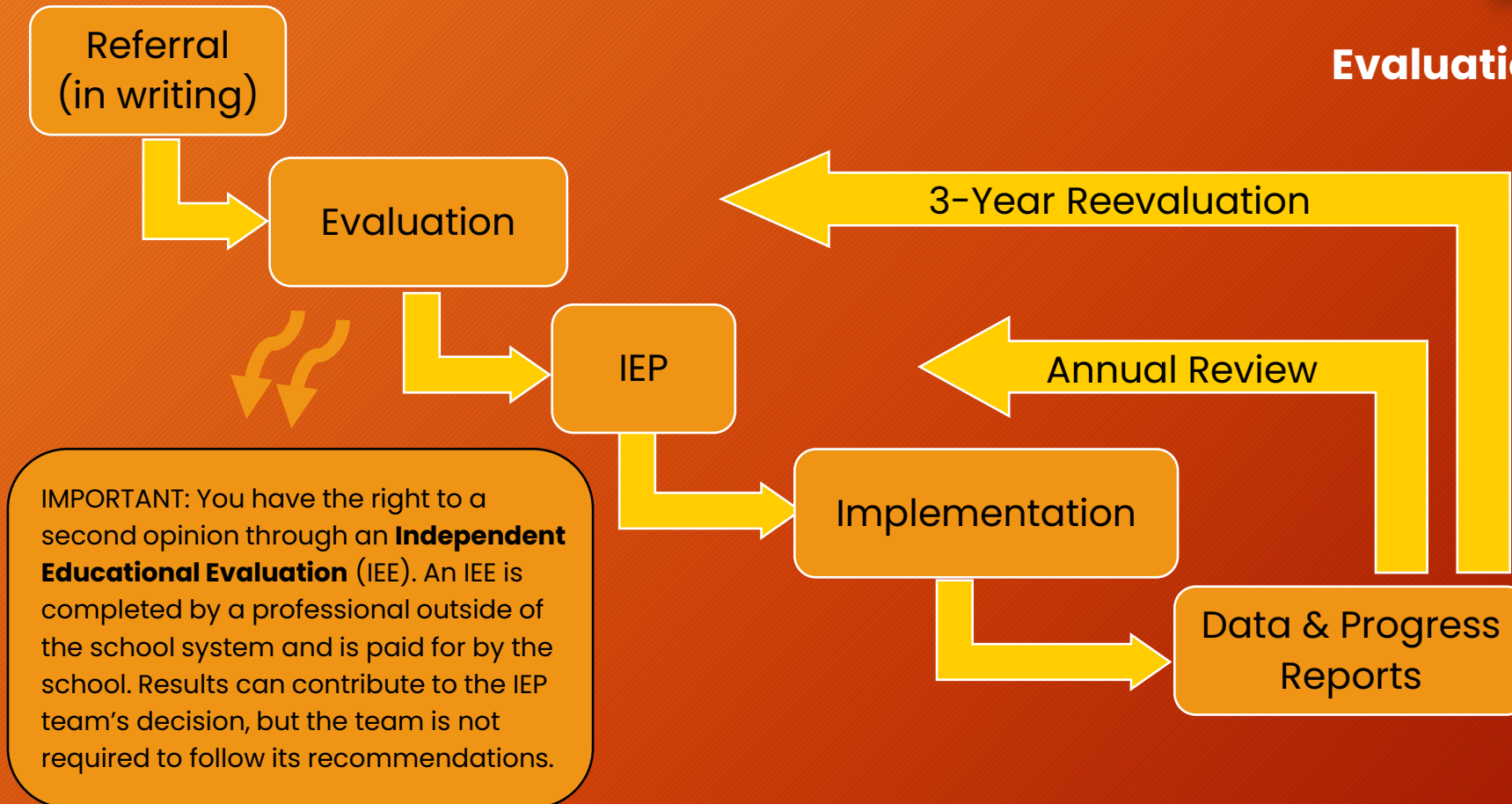
**Accommodations** appear on a 504 plan or an IEP and change HOW the student learns or shares their knowledge. (IEP and 504 plan)



**\*\*Note that *modifications* may take a student off the standard graduation track. It is important to discuss with the IEP team how adding modifications may change the type of diploma your student receives.**



## 4. Understand evaluations and the IEP process.



- Evaluations**
- Usually done by the school psychologist with input from others, including parents, teachers (general and special education) and OT, PT, SLP therapists
  - An important tool for the IEP team to understand the student, their strengths, challenges, and growth.
  - Must show “adverse educational impact” to be eligible for special education services.
  - Determine “eligibility” category and needs, which inform services.
  - May be done a maximum of once per year and a minimum of once every three years. Parents can request a re-evaluation at any time if they are seeking new and updated information about their student.



# 5. Learn to speak the language of data

- Assessment data should be used to assist the IEP team in problem solving, goal setting and creating specially designed instruction (SDI).
- Any changes in the IEP should be informed by data.
- Parents should expect to receive **quarterly progress reports** that provide data and report progress made on all goals included in the IEP.
- All goals included in the IEP should be SMART goals, so that progress can be easily and accurately measured and tracked. SMART goals are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound.
- Data on goals should be collected frequently and be available to parents upon request. The IEP can include how often data is collected, if needed.



## Present Levels of Performance

All IEPs and IEP meetings should begin by examining your student's present levels of performance. It is based on all the information and assessment data previously collected via the evaluation process. It should include:

- The student's strengths and weaknesses
- What helps the student learn
- What limits or interferes with the student's learning
- Objective data from current evaluations of the child
- How the child's disability affects his or her ability to be involved and progress in the general curriculum

**Knowing a student's PLP is critical to creating relevant goals and effective accommodations.**



## 6. Know how and when to discuss placement

**Inclusive education is a legally supported, evidence-based best practice that shows improved outcomes for ALL students.**

- IDEA requires school districts to offer a range of educational placements and services, from least restricted environment to separate facilities.
- Removal from general education should occur only when a student – even with the use of supplementary aides and services – is unable to access a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).
- Students with disabilities should learn alongside nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate and be removed only when their IEP requires another arrangement.
- Students have a right to attend the school they would attend if they were nondisabled, and in the case of the IEP requiring a different placement, then as close to their home as possible.
- Educational needs drive IEP goals and IEP goals drive placement.



### **Five ways NOT to determine placement:**

1. Prior to the IEP team agreeing on an appropriate IEP.
2. By diagnosis, labels or IEP category.
3. By academic performance, needed modifications to the curriculum, “severity” of disability, or level of support needed.
4. Lack of resources, administrative ease or difficulty in scheduling.
5. “We’ve always done it this way.”



# 7. Be a behavior detective



- **Behavior is communication.** Consider a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to learn more about behaviors interfering with your student's learning.
- Once an FBA has been completed, a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) or Positive Behavior Support Plan (BPSP) may be created, and behavior goals may be added to the IEP. The BIP/BPSP should describe systematic strategies to address undesirable behaviors and promote desired behaviors, as well as agreed upon responses to undesired behaviors.
- Students with disabilities are not allowed to be suspended because of behavior that is a result of their disability. Closely track how often your child is being sent home early or suspended and contact the IEP team with any concerns.



**Remember**, schools are required to teach our children, regardless of challenging behaviors, and to keep all children safe while doing so. Being sent home or forced to learn in isolation due to challenging behaviors is not acceptable. If this happens, an IEP meeting and a revision/creation of a behavior plan may be in order.





# 8. Follow the Hierarchy



1. Know who the student's IEP Case Manager is.
2. Know who the decision makers are
3. If you aren't getting the answers you need, work up the "ladder"
4. Respect the hierarchy, don't jump ahead.



# 9. Know your options for dispute resolution.

- **Request Facilitation:** Facilitation is a voluntary process for parents and districts to meet to discuss their concerns with the help of a trained, neutral facilitator. There is no cost for the facilitation services.
- **Request Mediation:** Mediation is a voluntary process for parents and districts to meet to discuss their concerns with the help of a trained, neutral mediator (Sound Options). There is no cost to the parties. Neither party is required to participate in mediation.
- **File a Community Complaint:** Any citizen can file a complaint if they believe a special education rule or law has been violated – for instance if LRE is not followed, or a service on the IEP not provided. OSPI can investigate allegations that occurred within the past year.
- **Request a Due Process Hearing:** You may wish to pursue this if the school is refusing to provide a service that you believe your student needs. In a hearing, parents and districts appear before an independent administrative law judge. The parties present information and documents about the issues so the judge can reach a decision.
- **File an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Complaint:** You can file a complaint if you believe your child was discriminated against, for instance if there are repeated patterns of exclusion for reasons related to disability (exclusion from field trips, disciplinary exclusion due to disability, repeated late bus arrival/pickup, exclusion from extracurricular activities and clubs, etc).



## Communication Requirements

The school team has 25 days to decide whether to evaluate after a referral is made.

They have 35 days to complete the evaluation after parents provide written consent.

They have 30 days after eligibility is determined for an IEP meeting to be held.

**Notice of Refusal** – explains what the district believes the parent is asking for and why the district is refusing to provide it

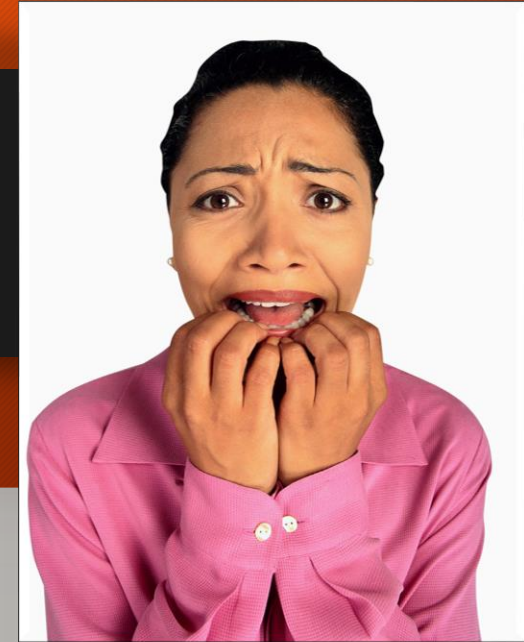
**Prior Written Notice** – Ensures that any service being proposed for reduction or elimination, or any change to the IEP program, occurs with sufficient parent notification so that parents can challenge the decision and/or exercise “stay put,” which ensures the student can receive existing services while the dispute is being worked out.



## 10. Be thoughtful when working with the IEP team

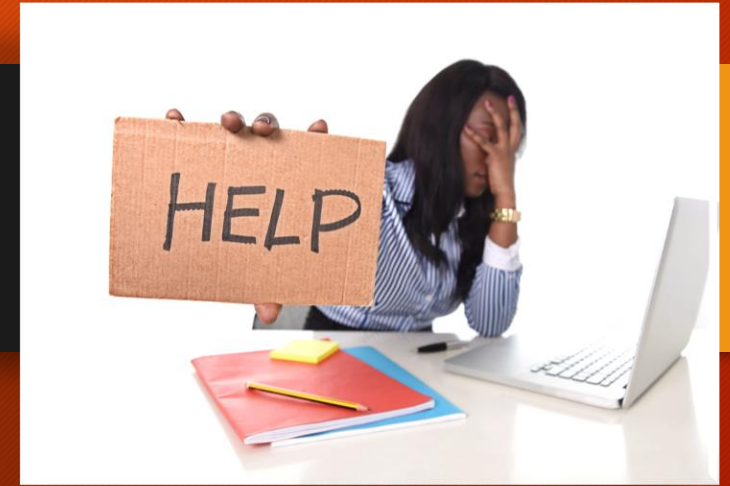
### Discussion

- Balancing relationships vs. advocacy
- Communication style
- Can we be friends?
- *Should* we be friends?





# Additional Resources



- Wrights Law ([www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com))  
Extensive parent-friendly information about special education law and advocacy nationwide.
- US Department of Education IDEA website (<http://idea.ed.gov/>)  
The federal government's website about the IDEA Act that dictates special ed law. Has extensive information about each area addressed in IDEA.
- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Special Education Parent & Community Liaison (<http://www.k12.wa.us/specialed/families/assistance.aspx>)  
Available as a resource to answer questions, provide information and referral, and help parents to understand the complaint process. Does not advocate on behalf on any one party.
- WA State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) ([www.oeo.wa.gov](http://www.oeo.wa.gov))  
OEO can serve as a neutral third party between families in public schools and may attend IEP meetings on occasion.
- The Arc of King County IEP Parent Partner Program ([www.arcofkingcounty.org](http://www.arcofkingcounty.org))  
We provide phone consultation, and we can occasionally connect trained and experienced IEP Parent Partners with parents and guardians needing support to navigate the special education system



# Contact Information



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