

PARENT ADVOCACY SERIES

Understanding the Difference: IEPs vs. 504 Plans

A side-by-side comparison to help you understand which plan fits your child's needs.

Navigating the world of school supports for your child can feel complicated, especially when you encounter terms like IEP and 504 Plan. While both are designed to help students succeed, they have important differences. **Understanding these differences is the first step** toward advocating for the right support for your child's unique needs.

A Side-by-Side Comparison

Feature	IEP (Individualized Education Program)	504 Plan
Governing Law	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) — a federal special education law.	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 — a federal civil rights law.
What It Is	A detailed, legally binding document outlining specialized instruction, supports, and services. A roadmap for the child's special education experience.	A plan detailing accommodations that give a student equal access to the learning environment. It levels the playing field.
Who Is Eligible?	Must have one of 13 specific disabilities listed in IDEA, and it must negatively impact learning enough to require specialized instruction.	Must have any disability that substantially limits a major life activity (learning, reading, thinking, concentrating). Broader definition than IDEA.
Type of Support	Provides both accommodations and modifications, plus specialized instruction and related services like speech or OT.	Provides accommodations to access the general education curriculum. Typically does not include curriculum modifications.
What It Looks Like	A formal document created by an IEP team, with required sections including PLAAFP, annual goals, services, and accommodations.	Often written, but less standardized than an IEP. Outlines the disability and the specific accommodations provided.
The Team	A legally defined group: parents/guardians, a general ed teacher, a special ed teacher, a district representative, and an evaluation expert.	Less formally defined — may include parents/guardians, teachers, and the principal or 504 coordinator.

Feature	IEP (Individualized Education Program)	504 Plan
Parental Rights	Strong procedural safeguards — written notice of meetings and changes, plus formal dispute resolution options.	Provides rights including notice of evaluation and placement decisions, though safeguards are generally less detailed than under IDEA.
Evaluation	Requires a comprehensive school evaluation for eligibility. Re-evaluations must occur at least every three years.	Requires an evaluation of substantial limitation — may include reviewing records and medical diagnoses rather than new formal testing.

Key Takeaways for Parents

- 1 An IEP provides specialized instruction.** Think of it as a plan that changes what or how your child is taught because their disability requires it.
- 2 A 504 Plan provides access.** It ensures your child has the same access to learning as their peers by removing barriers — for example, a student with a food allergy or anxiety.
- 3 A student can have a disability but not qualify for an IEP.** Many students who don't qualify for an IEP will qualify for a 504 Plan, since its definition of disability is broader.
- 4 You are a key part of the team.** Whether it's an IEP or a 504 Plan, your input is incredibly valuable — you know your child best.

Deciding which plan is the right fit depends entirely on your child's specific needs. **Trust your knowledge of your child**, and use this information to ask informed questions.