

PARENT ADVOCACY SERIES

Red Flags in IEPs: What to Watch For

Seven common warning signs that could keep your child from getting the support they need — and what a stronger plan looks like instead.

Reviewing your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) can feel overwhelming. This guide is here to help you spot common red flags — issues or missing pieces that could prevent your child from getting the support they need. **Knowing what to look for empowers you to ask the right questions** and advocate for a stronger, more effective plan.

1 Vague or Unclear Goals

A goal should be specific enough for anyone to understand what your child is working toward. Vague goals make it impossible to track true progress.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

"Jayden will improve his reading skills."

Why it matters: This doesn't explain what skills will be improved (fluency, comprehension?), how, or how you'll know when the goal is met.

What to look for: Goals should be SMART — Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Better: *"By the end of the second quarter, Jayden will read a 3rd-grade passage at 90 wpm with 95% accuracy."*

2 Lack of Measurable Benchmarks

Without clear ways to measure progress, goals are just wishes. The IEP must state how progress will be measured and how often you'll be updated.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

"Progress will be measured by teacher observation."

Why it matters: This is subjective and hard to track — you need objective data to see if strategies are working.

What to look for: Specific methods like "weekly fluency checks," "spelling test scores," or "work samples," plus how often you'll receive progress reports.

3 Insufficient or Missing Accommodations

Accommodations are changes that help your child access the curriculum. They should be tailored to your child's specific needs.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

An IEP for a child with dysgraphia that doesn't include assistive technology or reduced copying from the board.

Why it matters: Without the right tools, it's like asking someone with poor vision to read without their glasses.

What to look for: Accommodations that directly address the challenges in the evaluation reports and the PLAAFP section.

4 "Canned" or Copied-and-Pasted Information

An IEP is an individualized program. If goals or accommodations look generic or identical to a prior year despite changed needs, it's a major red flag.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

Seeing another child's name in the document, or goals that don't match your child's current grade level or abilities.

Why it matters: This suggests the team hasn't put careful thought into your child's unique strengths and challenges.

What to look for: The whole document — especially PLAAFP and goals — should paint a clear, current picture of your child.

5 Services Determined by Staffing, Not Need

The school must provide the services your child needs to make meaningful progress, regardless of current staffing or resources.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

"We only have a speech therapist here on Tuesdays, so we can only offer 30 minutes," when the evaluation recommends 60.

Why it matters: Your child's right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) means services are based on need, not convenience or budget.

What to look for: Type, frequency, and duration of services based on evaluation recommendations and IEP team goals.

6 Vague Description of Service Time

The IEP must be clear about how much time will be spent on each service.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

"Student will receive support from a special education teacher as needed."

Why it matters: "As needed" is not a commitment — it can result in inconsistent support.

What to look for: A specific number of minutes per session and sessions per week, e.g. "30 minutes, 3 times per week."

7 No Plan for Challenging Behavior

If your child's behavior is getting in the way of learning, the IEP team should address it with a formal plan.

RED FLAG EXAMPLE

The IEP mentions "outbursts," but there is no Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) or Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) included.

Why it matters: Simply punishing a behavior doesn't teach a new skill — a BIP proactively teaches positive replacement skills.

What to look for: If behavior is a concern, ask for an FBA to understand the "why," then build a supportive BIP together.

You are your child's most important advocate. **This checklist is a tool to support you on that journey.**