

The Difference between IEPs and 504 Plans

Both Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 plans can offer formal help for K–12 students with learning and attention issues. They’re similar in some ways but quite different in others. This chart compares them side-by-side to help you understand the differences.

	IEP	504 Plan
Basic Description	A blueprint or plan for a child’s special education experience at school.	A blueprint or plan for how a child will have access to learning at school.
What It Does	<p>Provides individualized special education and related services that are needed to meet the unique needs of the child.</p> <p>These services are provided at no cost to parents/guardians.</p>	<p>Provides services and changes to the learning environment to meet the needs of the child as adequately as other students.</p> <p>As with IEPs, a 504 plan is provided at no cost to parents/guardians.</p>
What Law Applies	<p>The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</p> <p>This is a federal special education law for children with disabilities.</p>	<p>Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973</p> <p>This is a federal civil rights law to stop discrimination against people with disabilities.</p>
Who Is Eligible	<p>To get an IEP, there are two requirements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A child has one or more of the 13 specific disabilities listed in IDEA: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Autism - Deaf/Blindness - Deaf/Hard of Hearing - Developmental Disability - Emotional Disability - Intellectual Disability - Multiple Disabilities - Other Health Impaired - Orthopedic Impairment - Speech/Language Impairment - Specific Learning Disability - Traumatic Brain Injury - Visual Impairment 2. The disability must affect the child’s educational performance and/or ability to learn and benefit from the general education curriculum to the extent that special education services are needed. 	<p>To get a 504 plan, there are two requirements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A child has a physical or mental impairment, which not identified under “umbrella” categories like in IDEA 2. The impairment must substantially limit one or more major life activities. Section 504 has a broader definition of a disability than IDEA. That’s why a child who does not qualify for an IEP might still be eligible for a 504 plan.

	IEP	504 Plan
Independent Educational Evaluation	Independent Educational Evaluations (IEE) can be funded by school districts or parents/guardians. Parents/guardians are entitled to an IEE at district expense if they disagree with the evaluation conducted by the district. Results of the IEE must be taken into account by the IEP team.	Does not allow parents/guardians to ask for an IEE. As with an IEP evaluation, parents can always pay for an outside evaluation themselves.
Who Creates the Program/Plan	<p>There are strict legal requirements about who participates. An IEP is created by an IEP team that must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child’s parent/guardian • At least one of the child’s general education teachers • At least one special education teacher • Staff member who can interpret evaluation results (e.g., school psychologist, special education teacher or other specialist) • A district representative with authority over special education services <p>With a few exceptions, the entire team must be present for IEP meetings.</p>	<p>The rules about who’s on the 504 team are less specific than they are for an IEP.</p> <p>A 504 plan is created by a team of people who are familiar with the child and who understand the evaluation data and special services options. This might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child’s parent/guardian • General education teacher(s) • Other staff, as appropriate
What's in the Program/Plan	<p>The IEP sets learning goals for a child and describes the services the school will provide. It’s a written document.</p> <p>Here are some of the most important things the IEP must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child’s present levels of academic and functional performance • Annual education goals for the child and how the school will track progress • The services the child will get—this may include special education, related, supplementary and summer services • The timing of services—when they start, how often they occur and how long they last • Any accommodations—changes to the child’s learning environment • Any modifications—changes to what the child is expected to learn or know • How the child will participate in standardized tests • How the child will be included in general education classes and school activities 	<p>There is no standard 504 plan. Unlike an IEP, a 504 plan doesn’t <i>have</i> to be a written document.</p> <p>A 504 plan generally includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student’s qualifying condition • Information on how the condition impacts the student’s ability to participate in the educational environment • Specific accommodations, supports or services for the child

	IEP	504 Plan
Parent Notice	<p>When the school wants to change a child’s services or placement, it must inform parents/guardians in writing <i>before</i> the change is implemented. This is called prior written notice. Notice is also required for any IEP meetings and evaluations.</p> <p>Parents also have “stay put” rights to keep services in place if there’s a dispute regarding proposed changes to the child’s IEP.</p>	<p>The school must notify parents about evaluation or a “significant change” in placement. Notice does not have to be in writing, but most schools do so anyway.</p>
Parent Consent	<p>A parent/guardian must consent in writing for the school to evaluate a child. Parents must also consent in writing before the school can provide services on the initial IEP.</p>	<p>Parent/guardian consent is required for the school district to evaluate a child.</p>
How Often It’s Reviewed and Revised	<p>The IEP team must review the IEP at least once a year.</p> <p>The student must be reevaluated at least every three years to determine whether services are still needed.</p>	<p>The exact time frame is not defined in the law. Generally, a 504 plan is reviewed annually, and a reevaluation is done every three years.</p>
How to Resolve Disputes	<p>IDEA gives parents/guardians several specific ways to resolve disputes (usually in this order):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediation • Due process complaint • Resolution session • Civil lawsuit • State complaint • Lawsuit 	<p>Section 504 gives parents/guardians several options for resolving disagreements with the school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediation • Alternative dispute resolution • Impartial hearing • Complaint to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) • Lawsuit
Funding/Costs	<p>Students receive services at no charge.</p> <p>States receive additional funding for eligible students.</p>	<p>Students receive services at no charge.</p> <p>States do not receive extra funding for eligible students. But the federal government can take funding away from programs (including schools) that don’t comply. IDEA funds can’t be used to serve students with 504 plans.</p>

Adapted from: The Understood Team (<https://www.understood.org>)