Understanding Special Education Basics - Parent University

December 4, 2025

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Who are your presenters?

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Today's session will cover fundamental information about special education.

Agenda

1. Introduction and definition of special education
2. Special education in Portland
3. Key legal concepts in special education
4. Referrals and eligibility
5. Least restrictive environment
6. Types of IEP meetings
7. Parent rights and getting more information

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The special education department is holding three sessions for Parent University this year.

- **Session 1** - Understanding Special Education Basics
  - Today's session
- **Session 2** - What to Expect at an IEP Meeting
  - January 22 at 6 p.m., King Middle School
- **Session 3** - The SE Continuum in PPS: Our Different Types of SE Programs
  - Date and time TBD

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Special education is an individual plan designed to support a student with disabilities, not a specific classroom or place.

- Every student who is eligible for special education has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that could include **specially designed instruction**, **related services**, and **accommodations** designed to meet their unique learning needs
- **Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)** is teaching that is focused on student's academic, behavior, and functional goals
- **Related services** are services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy
- **Accommodations** are supports or changes to the learning environment that help a student access their education

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The number of students with IEPs is continuing to increase in Portland.

- There were **1,045** students receiving IEP services from PPS as of October 1, 2019, which was **15.49%** of the total student population

- As of October 1, 2025, **1,220** students receive IEP services from PPS, which is **19.25%** of the total student population

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the basis for special education across the country.

- IDEA is a federal law that provides rights to eligible children with disabilities:
  - A free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE)
  - An individualized plan of services designed to meet their specific needs
- IDEA guarantees that your child, if eligible, will receive the special education and related services they need at **no cost** to you, and it gives you, the parent, specific rights in the process

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All eligible children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

- FAPE means that the services and supports in your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) are good enough to allow your child to make **meaningful progress** in school
- “Meaningful progress” may be different for each child, as it is based on their specific needs and skills
- Your child’s team will provide regular updates on their progress throughout the year, usually along with report cards

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Child Find is the legal duty of schools to identify and evaluate all children with disabilities.

- Child Find applies to **all** children in a school district, including those who are homeschooled or attend private schools
- These are the general steps of the Child Find process, though they may vary slightly depending on the situation:
  - Classroom Screening and General Education Interventions
  - Individual Screening
  - Referral
  - Evaluation
  - Eligibility Determination

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Parents can refer their child for evaluations to determine special education eligibility at any time.

- If parents believe their child may be eligible for special education, they can refer their child for evaluations at any time
- To make this referral, you can submit a request to your child's school principal or special education coordinator
- We recommend that parents put their request in writing if possible, but the school will also take a verbal request

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After a special education referral is submitted, the team discusses and completes evaluations.

- An IEP meeting will be held to determine which evaluations should be completed for your child
- Parents must sign a consent form to allow the evaluations
- After the consent form is signed, the school team has 45 school days to complete evaluations
- Parent should receive a copy of all evaluations to review at least 3 days before the IEP meeting
- After the 45 school days, another IEP team meeting is held to talk about all evaluations and determine if special education is needed

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Special education eligibility is a three-part process.

- To determine eligibility for special education, the team will discuss three questions, all of which must be answered as “yes”
  - Does your child meet the criteria for one of the 13 disability categories?
  - Is there data that shows there is an adverse effect on your child progress related to their disability?
  - Does your child need special education (an IEP), with specially designed instruction or does your child only need general education with support?

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When the IEP team determines that a child qualifies for special education, they create the plan.

- The team will meet to decide what programs and services should be in the student's IEP
- After the meeting, parents will receive a copy of the written notice, which is a summary of the IEP meeting
- Parents will also receive a copy of the IEP, and the parents must provide consent before special education services start at school

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IDEA requires that students spend as much time as possible in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

- LRE means that a child should spend as much time as possible in the general education classroom
- They should only be removed if they cannot make meaningful progress in the regular classroom, even with the use of accommodations.
- Placement decisions are always made by the IEP team and based on a child's individual needs
- At every annual IEP meeting, the team should consider trying a less restrictive setting

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Students are provided with a level of support that aligns with their needs.

- These are the possibilities for support, from least to most restrictive:
  - Intervention supports (RTI) before the special education referral
  - Special education services in the general education classroom
  - Special education services in the resource classroom
  - Special education services in a specialized program
- Most students with IEPs spend the majority of their time in the general education classroom

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There are several different types of IEP meetings that you will be invited to attend.

Meeting Type	When it Happens	Purpose	Key Parent Role
Initial IEP Meeting	Initial IEP when your child is found **eligible** for special education services.	To **develop the very first IEP** for your child, including goals, services, and placement.	Provide input on your child's strengths, needs, and vision for their future. Give **written consent** to services.
Annual Review Meeting	Must occur **at least once every 12 months** (annually).	To **review the current IEP**, discuss your child's progress toward their goals, and **develop a new IEP** for the upcoming year.	Review progress reports, discuss current needs, and suggest new goals and services.
Triennial Reevaluation Meeting	Must occur **at least once every three years**.	To review existing evaluation data, determine if **new testing** is needed, and decide if your child still qualifies for special education services.	Share observations from home, review testing results, and agree/disagree with the need for further testing.

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There are several different types of IEP meetings that you will be invited to attend.

Program Review/Amendment Meeting	As needed throughout the school year	To make **minor changes** to the current, active IEP without holding a full annual review (e.g., adding a service, adjusting a goal, changing minutes)	Discuss and agree to the specific proposed change(s)
Transition Planning Meeting	As needed, when changing schools or programs	To make any changes to the IEP, based on what makes sense for the new setting	Discuss and agree to the specific proposed change(s)
Note: parents can also request an IEP meeting at any time	At any time, upon parent request	To review and discuss any aspect of the IEP	Discuss and agree to any specific proposed change(s)

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The Procedural Safeguards Notice is a parent's guide to their legal rights within the special education system.

- Right to confidentiality, and to inspect and review the educational records of your child
- Right to give or withhold your consent prior to an evaluation, reevaluation, and initial placement into special education.
- Right to participate in meetings related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of your child, and the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education.
- Right to prior written notification of any changes in your child educational program or IEP.
- Right to FAPE at no cost to you.
- Right to have your child attend classes, participate in nonacademic and extracurricular activities and receive services with child who are not disabled to the maximum extent appropriate.
- Right to request an impartial due process hearing if you disagree with the IEP team's identification, evaluation, or placement of your child or the provision of FAPE to your child.
- Right to withdraw consent for the provision of special education and related services.
- Right to meaningfully participate in the IEP process.
- Right to enlist the district's interpretation or translation services.
- Link to Maine DOE website with family resources, including full procedural safeguards: https://www.maine.gov/doe/specialservices/resources

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Special Education is full of Specific Language!

- Your child's IEP team should make sure that you understand any specific terms or acronyms that are being used
  - **Parents should always feel free to ask for an explanation of any new or unfamiliar term**
- Use this link to access a reference list of common special education acronyms:
  - Individualized Education Program (IEP) Glossary for Parents

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Any questions?

- If you have more questions following the presentation, please reach out to your school team (teacher or administrator)
- Our central team is also available for any questions, you can find our email addresses at the beginning of the presentation
- For more information about special education in Portland, you can review our school board committee presentation from earlier this year: SE Board Update 10-26-25