

FORSYTH COUNTY SCHOOLS
DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Parent Toolkit

for Navigating the IEP Process

Safe • Connected • Thriving

A Resource for Families of Students with Disabilities

136 Almon C. Hill Drive • Cumming, GA 30040 • 770-887-2461
www.forsyth.k12.ga.us

Welcome to Special Education Services

Dear Families,

As the Director of Special Education, I want to welcome you to special education services in the Forsyth County School System. Please know that the Special Education Department will do whatever we can to support you, your child, your child's teacher, and your school in order to provide the most appropriate educational program for your child.

We have highly qualified support staff who are ready to assist you. In addition to your child's teachers and administrators, each school is assigned a Special Education Facilitator. This staff member is available to answer your questions, provide resources, and help you navigate the special education process. We encourage your involvement, your input, and your participation — it is only through this collaborative effort between school and home that we reach our shared goal of increased student achievement.

This toolkit was created with you in mind. Whether you are just beginning the IEP process or you've been part of your child's IEP team for years, our hope is that this guide gives you clear, practical information and a direct path to the people who can help. You are a valued and essential member of your child's IEP team, and you are not navigating this alone.

If I can be of service, please feel free to contact me. Thank you in advance for your continued support and partnership.

Sincerely,

Kara Hudspeth

Director, Department of Special Education
770-887-2461, ext. 310263
www.forsyth.k12.ga.us

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be a quick-reference companion as you move through the IEP process. You don't need to read it cover to cover — jump to whatever section is useful right now:

- Contact List — exactly who to call for what, starting with your school's Special Education Facilitator.
- Understanding the IEP Process — a step-by-step look at how a student is identified, evaluated, and supported.
- Your Role on the IEP Team — what you bring to the table, and your rights as a parent.
- Preparing for and Participating in an IEP Meeting — practical tips before, during, and after the meeting.
- Frequently Asked Questions — quick answers to the questions families ask most.
- Additional Resources — books, advocacy organizations, and state and national resources.

Contact List — We're Here to Help

The fastest way to get an answer is usually to start with your child's school. Your Special Education Facilitator works directly with your school and knows your child's program. If you need additional support, the Department of Special Education central office is also here for you at 770-887-2461.

Step 1: Start With Your School

Every school has a Special Education Facilitator who can answer day-to-day questions, help schedule meetings, and connect you with the right service provider. Find your school below.

Elementary Schools

School	Facilitator	Sp. Ed. & 504 Assistant Director
Big Creek	Karen Nemetz	Paul West
Brandywine	Lisa Williams	Paul West
Brookwood	Melanie Martin	Kristin Bourrie
Chattahoochee	John Edler	Kristen Reising
Chestatee	John Edler	Kristen Reising
Coal Mountain	Stephanie Lutin	Kristin Bourrie
Cumming	Jenny McClain	Kristen Reising
Daves Creek	Becky Scott	Paul West
Haw Creek	Brooks Peters	Kristin Bourrie
Johns Creek	Cyndi Johnson	Kristen Reising
Kelly Mill	Joey Darragh	Paul West
Mashburn	Lisa Williams	Paul West
Matt	Brooks Peters	Kristin Bourrie
Midway	Becky Scott	Paul West
New Hope	Karen Nemetz	Paul West
Poole's Mill	Jenny McClain	Kristen Reising
Sawnee	Stephanie Lutin	Kristin Bourrie
Settles Bridge	Amelia Gillis	Kristin Bourrie
Sharon	Elizabeth Hawkins	Kristen Reising

Shiloh Point	Melanie Martin	Kristin Bourrie
Silver City	Joey Darragh	Paul West
Vickery Creek (Elem.)	Elizabeth Hawkins	Kristen Reising
Whitlow	Cyndi Johnson	Kristen Reising

Middle & High Schools and Special Programs

School	Facilitator	Sp. Ed. & 504 Assistant Director
DeSana Middle	Jodi Hammond	Paul West
Hendricks Middle	Amelia Gillis	Kristin Bourrie
Lakeside Middle	Jenifer Dipboye	Kristin Bourrie
Liberty Middle	Matt Crawford	Kristen Reising
Little Mill Middle	Beth Binns	Kristen Reising
North Forsyth Middle	Amelia Gillis	Kristin Bourrie
Otwell Middle	Jodi Hammond	Paul West
Piney Grove Middle	Beth Binns	Kristin Bourrie
Riverwatch Middle	Deanna O'Donnell	Kristen Reising
South Forsyth Middle	Jodi Hammond	Paul West
Vickery Creek (Middle)	Jenifer Dipboye	Kristin Bourrie
Alliance Academy	Jen Sewell	Paul West
Denmark High	Matt Crawford	Kristen Reising
East Forsyth High	Jen Sewell	Paul West
Forsyth Central High	Deanna O'Donnell	Kristen Reising
Lambert High	Beth Binns	Kristin Bourrie
North Forsyth High	Deanna O'Donnell	Kristen Reising
South Forsyth High	Jen Sewell	Paul West
West Forsyth High	Matt Crawford	Kristen Reising
Forsyth Academy	Jenifer Dipboye	Kristin Bourrie
Forsyth Virtual Academy	Stephanie Lutin	Kristin Bourrie

Gateway Academy	Jenifer Dipboye	Kristin Bourrie
Compass GNETS	Joey Darragh	Kara Hudspeth
Preschool	Christine Metzger	—
SAIL Program	No facilitator assigned	Kara Hudspeth
Project LIFE / RISE	Jen Sewell / Cyndi Johnson	Susan Darlington

Step 2: Department of Special Education — Central Office

If your question is broader than one school, or you'd like to speak with a program coordinator directly, the central office team is listed below.

Name & Role	Responsibility	Contact
Kara Hudspeth, Director of Special Education	Department leadership	770-887-2461, ext. 310263
Connie Jennings, Administrative Assistant	Scheduling & general questions for the Director	770-887-2461, ext. 310261
Kathy Martin, Receptionist	Front office / general department contact	770-887-2461, ext. 310248
Teresa Dixon, Bookkeeper	Budget & purchasing questions	770-887-2461, ext. 310265
Charlene Northcutt, Records Clerk	Student record requests	770-887-2461, ext. 310159
Kristin Bourrie, Assistant Director	School-level support (see facilitator table)	770-887-2461, ext. 310251
Kristen Reising, Assistant Director	School-level support (see facilitator table)	770-887-2461, ext. 310269
Paul West, Assistant Director	School-level support (see facilitator table)	770-887-2461, ext. 310275
Kristi Quinn, Preschool Coordinator	Preschool special education	770-887-2461, ext. 310138
Mardy Hendon	Preschool & Extended School Year (ESY)	770-887-2461, ext. 310100
Susan Darlington, Transition Coordinator	Project LIFE, testing accommodations, vocational rehabilitation	770-887-2461, ext. 310253
Tricia Geran, Modified Curriculum Coordinator	Modified curriculum programs	770-887-2461, ext. 310273
Kristen DeBonis, Accommodated Curriculum Coordinator	Accommodated curriculum programs	770-887-2461, ext. 310271
Pam Majerus, Related Services Coordinator	OT, PT, speech, and other related services	770-887-2461, ext. 310162
Jessica Hall, Compliance & Section 504 Coordinator	Section 504 plans & compliance questions	770-887-2461, ext. 310252

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Understanding the IEP Process

A. Special Education Program Eligibility

A student from 3 through 21 years of age must meet eligibility criteria in at least one of the following disability categories to qualify for special education:

- Significant Developmental Delay (SDD) — available for students ages 3–9 only
- Intellectual Disability (mild, moderate, severe, or profound)
- Emotional and Behavior Disorders
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Visually Impaired
- Deaf/Blind
- Speech-Language Impairment
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impaired
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Autism Spectrum Disorder

B. Related Services

Related services are support services that help a student benefit from special education. A student must individually qualify for each related service provided:

- Audiology
- Physical Therapy
- Rehabilitation Counseling
- Occupational Therapy
- Orientation and Mobility Services
- Parent Training
- Educational Interpreters
- Transportation
- Other, as identified by the IEP Team

C. What Is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

An IEP is a written plan for a student with a disability, developed by educators, parents, and others as appropriate. It describes the special education and related services your child needs in order to benefit from a free, appropriate public education (FAPE), and it spells out how your child learns, how they best show what they know, and what the school will do to help them learn effectively.

D. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Students with disabilities are educated to the maximum extent appropriate alongside students who are not disabled. Separate classes, separate schooling, or any other removal from the regular education environment happens only when the nature or severity of the disability means that education in regular classes, even with supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

E. Who Is on the IEP Team?

The IEP is built by a team — and you are one of its most important members:

- You, the parent(s) or guardian(s)
- The student, when appropriate
- A special education teacher or provider
- A regular education teacher
- Someone who can interpret evaluation results
- A Local Educational Agency (LEA) representative
- A transition services agency representative, when relevant
- Others with knowledge or special expertise about your child, invited by you or the school

Your Role on the IEP Team

Parents and family members are the only people in a student's educational journey who are present from the very beginning through graduation. That perspective is irreplaceable. Here's what you bring to the team — and what you can expect from the process:

- You provide insight into your child's strengths, challenges, history, and development at home.
- You share family factors that may affect how your child learns.
- You've spent more hours with your child than anyone else on the team — your observations from home and the community matter.
- You are encouraged to collaborate, ask questions, and give feedback during meetings and as progress is reported.
- You have the right to be present at every IEP meeting, to have it scheduled at a mutually agreeable time and place, to know who will attend, and to invite anyone with knowledge or expertise about your child.
- You can choose to receive certain notices by email, including prior written notice and your procedural safeguards (parental rights).

Your Procedural Safeguards (Parental Rights)

Federal law (IDEA) and Georgia special education rules guarantee you a specific set of rights throughout this process — including the right to give or withhold consent, to review your child's records, and to disagree with a proposed evaluation, eligibility decision, or IEP. Your school will provide you a full written copy of your procedural safeguards, and you can request it again at any time. If you ever disagree with the IEP Team's decisions, options like a facilitated IEP meeting, mediation, a state complaint, or a due process hearing are available — your school's Special Education Facilitator or the central office can walk you through these options.

Preparing for and Participating in an IEP Meeting

Before the Meeting

1. Think through your child's abilities and needs — academics, language, self-help, behavior, and pre-vocational skills.
2. Gather any records that might help the team, including outside evaluations or therapy reports.
3. Do a little reading or research on the topics you expect to come up.
4. Talk with other parents who have been through IEP meetings — their experience can help you know what to expect.
5. Write down the questions and concerns you want to make sure get covered.

A Typical IEP Meeting Agenda

Meetings can vary, but most follow a similar flow:

- Introductions and a review of parental rights
- Parent concerns and input
- Student strengths and present levels of performance
- Special factors (behavior, limited English proficiency, visual impairment, etc.)
- Annual goals and objectives
- Classroom and program accommodations/modifications
- Testing and assessment, including whether the Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA) applies
- Assistive technology needs
- Placement and Least Restrictive Environment
- Related services needs
- Extended School Year (ESY), if applicable

Tips for a Successful Meeting

- Take a moment to get seated comfortably as everyone arrives.
- Make sure you understand who is in the room and their role with your child.
- Share your ideas and observations — your perspective is valuable data for the team.
- Keep the discussion positive and solution-focused.
- Ask questions any time something is unclear — there's no such thing as a silly question.
- If you need more time to review information, it's okay to ask for it.
- Try to resolve any differences within the team before looking at formal dispute options.

After the Meeting

- Write down your thoughts about the meeting and the IEP, and keep them with your copy of the IEP.
- Stay in touch with your child's teachers and service providers throughout the year.
- Visit your child's classroom when you can.
- Consider volunteering in the classroom or elsewhere at school.
- Remember: you can request an IEP meeting at any time during the year — you don't have to wait.
- Your child's IEP must be reviewed at least once a year to check progress on goals and revise the plan as needed.

Frequently Asked Questions

Here are answers to some of the questions families ask most often while navigating the IEP process. This is general guidance — for anything specific to your child, your school's Special Education Facilitator or the central office team (see the Contact List) is always your best resource.

Getting Started

How do I request an evaluation for my child?

Put your request in writing and give it to your child's teacher, school counselor, or principal. A written request helps create a clear record and starts the formal process. You can also reach out to your school's Special Education Facilitator for guidance on what to include.

Does asking for an evaluation mean I've given consent for testing?

No. Requesting an evaluation is not the same as giving consent. The school must still get your signed, informed consent before any evaluation begins, and that form will explain exactly which tests may be used.

How long does the evaluation process take?

Once the school receives your signed consent, it has 60 calendar days to complete the evaluation report. If your child is found eligible for special education, an IEP meeting must then be held within 30 calendar days of that eligibility determination.

What happens if I don't agree to the evaluation?

You can decline consent. If the school still believes an evaluation is needed, it may pursue mediation or a due process hearing to seek permission to evaluate your child.

The IEP Itself

What's the difference between an IEP and a 504 Plan?

An IEP is a detailed plan under IDEA that includes specialized instruction designed around your child's unique needs, along with any related services. A Section 504 Plan provides accommodations under civil rights law for a student with a disability who doesn't require specialized instruction. Our Compliance & Section 504 Coordinator can help clarify which may fit your child's situation.

How often is the IEP reviewed or updated?

At least once every 12 months, the IEP Team reviews the plan to check progress on goals and make revisions as needed. A full reevaluation of your child's eligibility happens at least once every three years, unless you and the school agree it isn't necessary.

Can I request a meeting before the annual review?

Yes. You may request an IEP meeting at any time during the school year if you have concerns or believe a change is needed. Putting your request in writing is the best way to start.

How will I know how my child is progressing on their IEP goals?

Your child's IEP will state how and when progress will be reported to you — at minimum, as often as students without IEPs receive report cards. Progress reports should clearly tell you whether your child is on track to meet each annual goal.

What is the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and does my child have to leave the general education classroom?

LRE means your child is educated alongside peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. A more separate setting is only used when the nature or severity of the disability means the general classroom with additional services and supports isn't enough to meet your child's needs.

What is Extended School Year (ESY) services?

ESY is special education and/or related services provided beyond the typical school year, considered at least once a year by the IEP Team. The team looks at whether your child would lose critical skills over a break and be unable to recover them in a reasonable time. ESY is provided at no cost to families, and you may decline the offer of ESY services if you choose.

Meetings and Decision-Making

Who has to be at the IEP meeting?

By law, the team includes you, a special education teacher or provider, a regular education teacher, someone who can interpret evaluation results, and a school system representative. You may also invite anyone with knowledge or special expertise about your child, and your child may attend when appropriate.

What if the meeting time doesn't work for my schedule?

Let the school know right away. Meetings must be scheduled at a time and place that works for both you and the school team, and you can suggest alternative times if the one offered doesn't fit.

What if I don't agree with what's being proposed in the IEP?

Try to resolve concerns within the team first — most disagreements are worked out this way. If they aren't, contact your school's facilitator or a central office staff member in the special education office. They will be able to review options to include dispute resolution procedures.

If I don't sign the IEP, will services start anyway?

It is our goal to leave every IEP meeting in agreement. Parent signature is not required for implementation of the IEP. Services may begin as indicated in the IEP and you will receive Prior Written Notice from the district indicating the rationale for implementing the IEP. If you have further questions or want to further express your disagreement, contact your school's assigned Facilitator or Assistant Director (see contacts above) to review your options.

Can I bring someone with me to the IEP meeting?

Yes. You may bring anyone you choose who has knowledge or expertise about your child — a family member, advocate, therapist, or friend for support. Please ensure that you communicate who you are bringing with your child's case manager prior to the meeting.

Support and Resources

What if my child needs additional special education services or supports?

The IEP Team considers whether additional services or supports may be needed. You are a member of your child's IEP team. You may provide input regarding proposed changes to the IEP to your child's case manager at any time. An IEP meeting will be scheduled to review and consider your proposals.

My child is getting close to high school graduation age — what happens with transition planning?

Transition planning begins during the IEP year your child turns 14 (typically 8th grade), and from that point your child becomes an active, invited participant in their own IEP meetings. The team will use age-appropriate transition assessments to help plan for life after high school. Our Transition Coordinator is a great first call for these questions.

What if we move to a different school district during the school year?

If your child has an IEP and transfers within Georgia or from another state, the new district must provide FAPE while it either adopts your child's existing IEP or develops a new one — your child's services should not simply stop during the transition.

Where can I get more support as a parent?

You don't have to navigate this alone. In addition to your school's Special Education Facilitator, organizations like Parent to Parent of Georgia, the Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership, and the Georgia Department of Education's Special Education Services and Supports division offer guidance, fact sheets, and emotional support for families. See the Additional Resources section of this toolkit for details.

Don't see your question here? Reach out to your school's Special Education Facilitator or call our central office at 770-887-2461 — see the Contact List at the front of this toolkit.

Additional Resources

You do not have to do this alone. The organizations below offer information, advocacy support, and — just as importantly — community, so you don't have to feel isolated in this process.

Georgia & National Education Resources

- Forsyth County Schools — www.forsyth.k12.ga.us (select Departments > Special Education)
- Georgia Department of Education, Special Education Services and Supports — www.gadoe.org
- Center for Parent Information & Resources — www.parentcenterhub.org
- U.S. Department of Education — www.ed.gov
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) — idea.ed.gov

Parent & Family Support

- Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership — www.parentmentors.org
- Parent to Parent of Georgia — www.p2pga.org
- Georgia Advocacy Office — www.thegao.org
- Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities — www.gcdd.org
- Atlanta Alliance on Developmental Disabilities (AADD) — www.aadd.org

Disability-Specific & National Support Organizations

- Autism Society of Georgia — autismnow.org/local/autism-society-of-georgia
- Autism Speaks — www.autismspeaks.org
- CHADD (ADHD) — www.chadd.org
- Down Syndrome Association of Atlanta — www.dsaatl.org
- Learning Disabilities Association of Georgia — www.ldag.org
- International Dyslexia Association – Georgia Branch — www.idaga.org
- Council for Exceptional Children, Georgia — community.cec.sped.org/ga
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association — www.asha.org
- Georgia Center of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing — www.gcdhh.org
- Brain Injury Association of Georgia — www.braininjurygeorgia.org
- Epilepsy Foundation of Georgia — www.epilepsyga.org
- The Spina Bifida Association of Georgia — www.spinabifidaga.org
- National Down Syndrome Congress — www.ndsccenter.org
- United Cerebral Palsy — www.ucp.org

A Few Recommended Books for Families

- The Complete IEP Guide: How to Advocate for Your Special Child — Lawrence Siegel

- The Everything Parent's Guide to Special Education — Amanda Morin
- Negotiating the Special Education Maze — Anderson, Chitwood & Hayden
- The Art of Advocacy: A Parent's Guide to a Collaborative IEP Process — Charmaine L. Thaner
- Differently Wired: Raising an Exceptional Child — Deborah Reber
- What Every Parent Needs to Know About Special Education — Gerry Klor

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