

IEP (INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN) VS. 504 PLAN

UNDERSTANDING THE KEY DIFFERENCES

The main distinction is that IEPs provide individualized instruction and legally enforceable services, while 504 Plans focus on accommodations to ensure equal access. Choosing between them depends on whether the child needs specialized instruction to make progress (IEP) or primarily needs environmental adjustments to access the curriculum (504 Plan). Parents play a critical role in both processes, with legally mandated involvement in IEPs and encouraged participation in 504 Plans.

KEY DIFFERENCES:

FEATURE	IEP	504 PLAN
Purpose	Provides specialized instruction and related services	Provides accommodations to access general education
Governing Law	IDEA	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
Services	Special education, related services, assistive technology, measurable goals	Accommodations and modifications only; rarely includes services
Goals & Progress	Measurable annual goals with progress reports	Goals not required; progress tracking is optional
Team Involvement	Multidisciplinary team including parents, general and special education teachers, school psychologist, and district representative	School team; parent involvement encouraged but not always legally mandated
Review Frequency	At least annually; full reevaluation every 3 years	Typically annually; reevaluation every 3 years or as needed
Legal Protections	Strong procedural safeguards, due process rights mediation, and hearings	Civil rights protections; fewer procedural safeguards, complaints handled through OCR
Cost to Family	All services provided at no cost	Accommodations provided at no cost
Scope	Changes how a child is taught	Changes the conditions under which a child learns
Eligibility	Must have one of 13 IDEA disability categories and need specialized instruction	Any disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities, including learning

ELIGIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS:

IEP:

The child must have a recognized disability under IDEA and demonstrate that it adversely affects educational performance, requiring specialized instruction.

504 Plan:

Broader eligibility; any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits major life activities, including learning, qualifies.

Students who do not meet IEP criteria may still receive a 504 Plan.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

ADHD:

IEP:

Needed if ADHD significantly impacts academic performance or co-occurs with a learning disability, requiring specialized instruction and related services.

504 Plan: Appropriate if the child performs at grade level but needs extended test time or seating accommodations.

Autism:

IEP:

For students needing tailored instruction, social skills goals, or therapy services.

504 Plan:

For students who can access grade-level material but need visual schedules and sensory breaks.