



# An Introduction to **Special Education**

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
Tony Evers, PhD, State Superintendent

# An Introduction to Special Education

Welcome to special education. You will hear many new words. Ask if you don't know what they mean. Here are some you will hear.

**DPI:** Department of Public Instruction.  
DPI is in charge of all public schools.

**FAPE:** Free Appropriate Public Education.

**IEP:** Individualized Education Program.  
The IEP is a written plan. It tells how the school will change the way they teach to fit your child's needs.

**IDEA:** Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It is the federal special education law.

**LEA:** Local educational agency. Your LEA is usually your school district.

(See page 9 for more special education words.)

A division in the DPI takes care of special education. This division is called the Division for Learning Support.

You can call DPI's information number if you need to contact DPI: (800) 441-4563.

DPI has a website at [sped.dpi.wi.gov](http://sped.dpi.wi.gov). The DPI website has a lot of useful information.


## There are other agencies to help parents:

WI-FACETS  
600 West Virginia Street,  
Suite 501  
Milwaukee, WI 53204  
(414) 374-4645  
TDD: (414) 374-4635  
(877) 374-0511  
[www.wifacets.org](http://www.wifacets.org)

Disability Rights Wisconsin  
131 West Wilson Street,  
Suite 700  
Madison, WI 53703  
(608) 267-0214  
TTY: (888) 758-6049  
(800) 928-8778  
[www.disabilityrightswi.org](http://www.disabilityrightswi.org)

Wisconsin Statewide  
Parent-Educator Initiative  
(WSPEI)  
(877) 844-4925  
[www.wspei.org](http://www.wspei.org)

**Thank you to the students  
(and their teacher,  
Patricia Werner) at the  
Wisconsin School for the  
Deaf for the artwork on  
the front and back covers.**



## **If your child has a disability, special education can help your child learn...**

You will work as part of a team along with others from the school. The team will decide if your child qualifies for special education. If your child qualifies, the team will make a written plan for your child. The plan is called an *Individualized Education Program* or IEP. The team is called the IEP team.

The IEP is developed by the IEP team at a meeting. An IEP is good for one year. It can be changed anytime during the year in another IEP team meeting, or it may be changed anytime during the year without an IEP team meeting if you agree.

The IEP team has a very important job. You will want to go to all IEP team meetings. You will want to be part of all the decisions about your child.

You know your child best. The IEP team needs you!

## **Who participates on the IEP Team?**

- Parents. Parents are equal partners with the school staff on the IEP team.
- The child. When the team plans for life after high school and at other times, if appropriate.
- An LEA (school district) representative. A person from the school district who can make sure your child gets the IEP services.
- The child's regular education teacher.
- The child's special education teacher.
- Someone who can explain the tests your child took.
- For an older child, someone from each agency that will provide services to prepare the child for life after high school.
- Other people invited by you or by the school.

Sometimes one person does more than one job on the team. A person may be excused from all or part of the meeting if you agree in writing.

# Referral

Anyone can ask the school to decide if a child needs special education. You, a teacher, a nurse or a doctor can ask. This is called a referral. A referral must be written. You can send a referral letter to the principal or special education director.

A referral letter should:

- Tell the date.
- Say “This is a referral for special education.”
- Tell the child’s first and last name, date of birth, and school.
- Tell why you think the child might need special education.

Your school has up to 15 business days from when they get a referral to decide if more tests are needed. Your school will ask for your permission if more tests are needed. Your school has up to 60 days from when they get your permission to test your child and decide if your child qualifies. They have up to 30 days after your child qualifies to:

- Write an IEP.
- Decide where your child will receive special education services and tell you in writing.

The school will send you paperwork. Start a file.

You need to understand the papers so you can help the others on the IEP team. If you don’t understand something, call the school. They will explain it. They also will tell you where you can get more help understanding it.

## Steps in the IEP team process:

1. Referring your child for special education.
2. Evaluating your child.
  - Does your child have an impairment?
  - Does your child need special education?
3. Deciding what services are needed and writing the IEP. The school must have a meeting to write the IEP within 30 days of deciding your child is eligible for special education.
4. Deciding where your child will receive services and sending you a placement notice.
5. Reviewing the IEP and placement at least once each year.
6. Reevaluating your child at least once every three years. You and the school can agree not to reevaluate your child.

State and federal laws say parents must get notices at several important steps in the process.

You will get a written notice:

- before the IEP team evaluates your child (even if no new testing is needed).
- before the school puts your child in special education.
- before the school changes your child's IEP or placement.
- if the school refuses your request to change your child's evaluation, IEP, services, or placement.

As a parent you will also get a list of special education rights:

- once a year;
- when the school gets the first special education referral for your child;
- when you request that an IEP team evaluate your child;
- the first time in a school year you request a due process hearing;
- the first time in a school year you send a complaint to DPI;
- when the school decides to change your child's placement for breaking school rules;
- when you ask for the list of rights.

*Reminder: Tell the school if your address changes.*

## Permission

Your permission is important. The school must get your permission at key times. You must give your written permission:

- before the IEP team gives your child special tests.
- before the school first gives your child special education services for the first time.

Make sure you know what you are signing. If you don't understand all the paperwork, ask the school to explain. It's important that you understand. That way you can help the IEP team make good decisions.

## Evaluations

An IEP team evaluates your child. The IEP team starts by looking at information it already has. You will share information about your child. You and the rest of the team will decide if the team needs more information. This can happen at a meeting or through a telephone call. Sometimes more information is needed. Then the team decides how to get more information. The teachers might test your child. They might watch your child in class. They will get a complete picture of your child.

Before the teachers test your child, you will be told in writing about the tests. The school will ask your permission to give the tests. When the testing is finished, you will be invited to an IEP team meeting.

# The IEP Team Meeting

You are an equal partner on the IEP team along with the teachers. You are an expert about your child, so you need to speak up! The rest of the team needs your ideas.

At the meeting, the team will talk about all the information. This includes what you have told the team. The team will decide if your child has a disability and if special education is needed. Then the team will write an evaluation report. You will get a copy of the report. If your child is not eligible for special education, the school will tell you in writing.

If your child will get special education, the team writes an IEP. When the IEP is finished, the team decides where your child will receive special education services. The team decides based on the IEP.

Sometimes the IEP team can do all of its work in one meeting. Sometimes it takes more than one meeting. You may want to take a break before planning your child's program. You may need time to read the reports. You may need time to talk to others about what the team decided. Ask the IEP team to wait if you need some time. The school will hold another meeting to finish if they can do it within the time lines.

## Ideas for IEP team meeting:

Talk with your child's teachers before the meeting.

Bring a list of your questions or concerns. You can use the worksheets in this booklet.

Some parents find it stressful to go to an IEP team meeting. Bringing someone with you may help.

You can bring an expert or someone who knows your child to the IEP meeting.

If you need notes to remember what was said at the meeting, take notes or ask someone to do it for you.

If you need time to think or talk to someone else, tell the rest of the IEP team that you want to set up another meeting.

Impairments that may be considered at the IEP team meeting:

- Autism
- Cognitive Disability (CD)
- Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD)
- Hearing Impairment (HI)
- Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
- Orthopedic Impairment (OI)
- Other Health Impairment (OHI)
- Significant Developmental Delay (SDD)
- Speech or Language Impairment (S/L)
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Visual Impairment (VI)

## What is in the IEP?

The IEP includes—

- your child’s present level of performance.
- annual goals.
- special education and related services.
- the starting date, amount, frequency, location, and duration of IEP services.
- services your child needs to succeed in regular education.
- supports that teachers need to teach your child.
- the amount of time your child will not be in regular classes and not learn the general education curriculum.
- for children 14 and older, planning for life after high school.
- how the school will measure progress on the IEP goals.
- when the school will tell you about your child’s progress on the IEP goals.

## Writing the IEP

The IEP is a plan. It tells about your child’s school needs. It tells what your child’s learning goals are for the year. It tells what services the school will give your child.

As much as possible, your child will be in the regular classroom (or for 3- to 5-year-olds, an age appropriate setting). As much as possible, your child will learn what children without disabilities learn.

At least once a year the IEP team must meet to talk about the IEP. You can ask the IEP team to meet and make changes if you think they are needed. Call, email, or write a letter to your principal or your child’s teacher.

## Where Will Your Child Receive Special Education Services?

When the team finishes the IEP, the team will decide where your child will receive special education services. The team will decide based on the IEP.

As much as possible, a child with a disability should receive services in the same place as children without disabilities. Sometimes this is not possible. Sometimes the child’s IEP can’t be carried out in the place the child would be if they didn’t have a disability.

A child age 3-5 may receive services in the home, in a childcare program, in a school 4K, or in a Head Start program.

At least once a year the IEP team meets to decide where your child should receive special education services.



## After the IEP Team Meeting

The school may ask you to sign the IEP. Signing it does not mean you agree with everything. Signing it means you were at the meeting. So even if you don't agree with everything, you can sign it.

You can ask for a copy of the IEP. If you do not ask for it, you will get a copy when the school tells you in writing where your child will receive special education services.

You should be able to understand the IEP. You can give a copy to anyone.

The IEP must be available to all of your child's teachers and service providers, and the IEP must be implemented.

If this is the first time your child will get special education, the school will ask for your written permission. After you give it, the school will start your child's special education.

During the year, school staff will tell you if your child is making progress to reach the IEP goals. The team should review the IEP if your child is not making progress. If you think the IEP needs to be changed, call your principal or your child's teacher.

## What about your child's ideas?

You can ask your child what he or she needs.

You can tell the IEP team what you think your child needs.

Many children can be a part of their own IEP team! You can bring your child to the IEP meeting.

If possible you should talk to the school before bringing your child to the IEP team meeting.

Older children (by age 14) must be invited to IEP team meetings that plan for life after high school.

If your child can understand the IEP, you can share it with him or her.





Sometimes problems can't be solved without an outside person's help. To find out more, or to ask for mediation, call—

The Wisconsin Special Education Mediation System (WSEMS) at:

(888) 298-3857 (Toll-Free Voice)

262-538-1618 (TTY)

262-538-1348 (Fax)

Website: <http://www.wsems.us/>

## Solving Problems

If you have a problem, try talking to people at school. Sometimes you may not agree with the decisions of the IEP team. Try these!

- Ask someone for advice.
- Write a letter to the school.
- Ask for another IEP team meeting.
- Talk it out.
- Say, “Can you help me understand...?”
- Make suggestions: “Would you be willing to try...?”

You can also ask for mediation. There are trained people (mediators) to help. A mediator can help you and the school solve the problem. Both you and the school must agree to do it. It is free. The meetings are private. Any agreement will be in writing. The law says that you and the school must follow the agreement.

IEP team meetings or mediation can solve most problems. If you need help, you can talk to another parent or one of the agencies on page 1. In a rare case, these might not work. You can ask for a due process hearing. This is a formal hearing before a hearing officer, who is like a judge. The hearing officer will make a decision about the issue.

If you think the school did not follow special education laws, you can file a complaint with DPI. You can call DPI for more information about hearings and complaints.

Do you want to learn more about special education?

Do you want to know more about IEPs?

## You can get a book called *Special Education in Plain Language.*

It is available from:

- your school district's special education office, (availability may be limited.) or
- the DPI website: [sped.dpi.wi.gov/files/sped/pdf/spec-ed-plain-lang-english.pdf](http://sped.dpi.wi.gov/files/sped/pdf/spec-ed-plain-lang-english.pdf).

## More special education words you will use:

**business day:** Monday through Friday, except state and federal holidays.

**evaluation:** A team decides if your child needs special education. You are part of the team. The team will decide the kind and amount of services.

**mediation:** An outside person helps parents and the school solve problems.

**placement:** The placement is the IEP, the type of special program (e.g., resource room, self-contained class), and the child's school.

**reevaluation:** Any evaluation after your child qualifies for special education.

**referral:** When someone thinks a child might need special education and tells the school in writing.

**related services:** Services your child needs to benefit from special education.

**special education:** The special teaching your child gets to meet his or her needs as a child with a disability.

## Other good websites for parents:

[sped.dpi.wi.gov/sped\\_parent](http://sped.dpi.wi.gov/sped_parent)  
[www.wifacets.org](http://www.wifacets.org)  
[www.disability.gov](http://www.disability.gov)  
[www.wspei.org](http://www.wspei.org)  
[www.parentcenternetwork.org](http://www.parentcenternetwork.org)  
[idea.ed.gov](http://idea.ed.gov)

## Topics in Special Education in Plain Language include:

- Parents' Rights
- Getting School Records
- Private Schools
- Problem Solving
- Discipline and Behavior Issues
- The IEP Process
- Timelines
- Parent Consent
- What Schools Do
- What Parents Need to Know
- Tips and Ideas
- List of Resources and Organizations
- and MORE!

# A Worksheet for Parents

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

School Year: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

My child's principal and phone number:

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My child's special education teachers and their phone numbers:

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My child's general education teachers and their phone numbers:

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Other important numbers:

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Members of my child's IEP team and their phone numbers:

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Dates for this year's IEP team meeting:

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What are my child's strengths at home and at school?

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What are my child's needs?

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## A Worksheet for Parents (continued from other side)

What supports are needed for my child to be successful at school?

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What are my dreams for my child?

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What are my concerns about my child's education?

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My child is interested in the following activities:

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## **For more information contact:**

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Special Education Team  
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
P.O. Box 7841  
Madison, WI 53707-7841  
608-266-1781

[dpisped@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:dpisped@dpi.wi.gov)  
[http://sped.dpi.wi.gov/sped\\_parent](http://sped.dpi.wi.gov/sped_parent)



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[34 CFR Sec. 75.620]



