

IEP or Section 504 Plan?

A parent-friendly guide to what each plan does—and why the right fit depends on your child's needs

START HERE: Use this guide to organize your questions and prepare for a productive conversation with your child's school team.

The short answer

An IEP is for a student who meets IDEA eligibility requirements and needs specially designed instruction because of a disability. **A Section 504 plan** is for a student who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities and needs protections, accommodations, related aids, or services for equal access.

IEP: individualized special education

- **Law:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- **Eligibility:** The student must meet criteria under an IDEA disability category and, because of the disability, need special education and related services.
- **Core purpose:** Provide a free appropriate public education through specially designed instruction based on the child's unique needs.
- **Written plan:** Includes present levels, measurable annual goals, services, accommodations, how progress will be measured, placement information, and other required components.
- **Team:** Includes the parent, at least one general education teacher when applicable, at least one special education teacher/provider, a district representative, someone who can interpret evaluation results, and others as appropriate.
- **Progress:** Parents receive reports on progress toward annual IEP goals.
- **Procedural protections:** IDEA contains detailed notice, consent, dispute-resolution, discipline, and due-process protections.

Section 504 plan: disability access and nondiscrimination

- **Law:** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a federal civil-rights law.
- **Eligibility:** The student has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Learning does not have to be the activity that is limited.
- **Core purpose:** Ensure equal access and provide an appropriate education through regular or special education and related aids and services.
- **Written plan:** Schools commonly document accommodations and services in a 504 plan, although the federal regulation does not require one specific form or title.

- **Team:** Decisions are made by a group of people knowledgeable about the student, the evaluation data, and placement options.
- **Progress:** A 504 plan does not require annual goals and IDEA-style goal-progress reports, although schools may monitor effectiveness.
- **Procedural protections:** Section 504 requires notice, evaluation and placement procedures, periodic reevaluation, and an impartial hearing process; local procedures differ.

Quick comparison

Question	IEP	Section 504
Needs specially designed instruction?	Yes.	Not necessarily.
Includes measurable annual goals?	Yes.	Not federally required.
Can include accommodations?	Yes.	Yes.
Can include related services?	Yes, when required for FAPE.	Yes, when needed for FAPE/equal access.
Requires evaluation?	Yes.	Yes; the procedures may be less prescriptive than IDEA.
Is one “better”?	No. It is appropriate when IDEA criteria are met.	No. It is appropriate when Section 504 criteria and needs are met.

A few important clarifications

- A diagnosis alone does not automatically determine which plan a student needs. The team must consider the disability’s educational impact and the supports or instruction required.
- A student who qualifies under IDEA generally does not need a separate 504 plan; implementing the IEP can satisfy Section 504 FAPE requirements.
- Good grades do not automatically rule out disability eligibility. Teams should look at access, effort, functioning, and need—not grades alone.
- Neither plan should be built from a generic checklist. Supports must be individualized.

Important note

This resource provides general educational information, not legal advice. Federal law provides a foundation, but state rules, timelines, forms, and local procedures may differ.

Reliable starting points

[U.S. Department of Education: About IDEA](#)

[U.S. Department of Education: Section 504 and FAPE FAQs](#)

[U.S. Department of Education: Disability Discrimination FAQs](#)