



March 2025

Tip: Keep these principles in mind as you advocate for your child.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is built on six principles that help ensure that children with disabilities have meaningful access to education in the United States.

Principle 1: Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Eligible students with disabilities have a legal right to a free appropriate public education, commonly referred to as FAPE.

- **Free:** Special education and related services are provided to eligible students with disabilities at the government's expense, meaning there is no cost to the family. Families are responsible for fees that other families might need to pay like club dues, sports team fees, or field trip costs.
- **Appropriate:** Children who qualify for special education get an Individualized Education Program (IEP) designed to meet their unique needs.
- **Public:** Public schools are responsible for the education of students with disabilities.
- **Education:** Children with disabilities are entitled to an education. For children with IEPs, education is specialized and often includes services like occupational therapy and speech therapy.

Principle 2: Appropriate Evaluation

To find out if a child is eligible for special education and an IEP, the school needs to evaluate the child to identify their education needs. Evaluations are conducted by professionals and

different types of assessments may be given. The results of the evaluation are shared and discussed with the IEP team, which includes parents, administrators, general and special education teachers, and the professionals who conducted the assessments.

Principle 3: Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individualized is the key in an Individualized Education Program (IEP). When a student is found eligible for special education they must have a written IEP that lays out their specific educational goals, and the special instruction and services that will help the student realize those goals and thrive at school. The IEP team develops the IEP, and the IEP must be updated at least once a year.

Principle 4: Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

IDEA states that, “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled.”

In more straightforward terms this means that disabled children should, as much as possible, be in the same classrooms as children who do not have IEPs. IEP teams must first consider how to support a child with a disability in the same classroom as other children before considering other options. If a student does not spend all their time in a classroom with nondisabled students, the IEP must explain why and how much of their time is outside of that classroom.

Principle 5: Parent and Student Participation in Decision Making

IDEA recognizes that parent and guardian participation is critical to the successful education of children with disabilities. In fact, Congress found that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by:

“strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home;”

Parents and youth, as much as possible and when appropriate, must be members of the IEP team and make decisions about the student’s education, including but not limited to placement and planning for their transition to adulthood.

Principle 6: Procedural Safeguards

Parents and students' legal rights under IDEA are protected by a set of procedural safeguards. Some of the procedural safeguards require that schools:

- Give parents a written notice that provides information about special education, procedural safeguards, parent and student involvement, and student and parent rights
- Obtain a parents' consent before evaluating their child for special education
- Give written notice of IEP meetings
- Provide prior written notice when a school proposes to change a student's placement, or when a school is going to deny services
- Give parents access to or copies of their child's school records

For more on procedural safeguards, check out Understood's [10 key procedural safeguards in IDEA](#).

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) throughout the country can give you information about any of the Six Principles of IDEA. [Find your local PTI →](#)

Special Education Resources:

- [General Special Education Resources | DREDF](#)
- [Find Your Parent Center](#)
- [Key Definitions in IDEA | A Reference List](#)
- [OSEP English-Spanish Glossary](#)
- [Parents' Rights - Quality Assurance Process | CA Dept of Education](#)
- [Sample Letters and Forms | DREDF](#)
- [SERR: Special Education Basics Toolkit | Disability Rights California](#)
- [17 Special Education Advocacy Tips | Disability Rights California](#)
- [The Important Role of Parents in Special Education](#)
- [Parents on the IEP Team | Center for Parent Information and Resources](#)