



## Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

# Special Education Overview

More and more students who receive special education services are being educated in general education classrooms. As a general education teacher, you need to be aware of some of the issues that arise with having students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in your classroom. This *Teachers' Desk Reference* provides a brief overview of the special education process.

### Special Education Law

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that requires states to ensure that all eligible children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Schools must provide eligible children with specialized supports and services to address their educational needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means that students must be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. State and federal laws require IEP teams to consider the general education classroom setting, with supplementary aids and services, before considering more restrictive placements. *Pennsylvania laws regarding special education are found in Chapter 14 (for school districts) and Chapter 711 (for charter schools) of the Pennsylvania School Code, which is available at [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net), Legal, PA Law and Regulations.*

The concept of special education is simple. If a student has unique needs that require special education services and supports, those needs are to be determined and a program to meet those needs must be designed and carried out.

### Student Eligibility

In order for a student to be eligible for special education services, the student must meet two requirements. First, the student must be identified as having one of the thirteen disabilities listed in the IDEA: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment.

Second, the student must also require specially-designed instruction as determined by an evaluation team. Specially-designed instruction refers to the special methods, equipment, materials, and adaptations that are needed for students to be successful in school and to achieve their IEP goals. This may involve accommodations and/or modifications to the general education curriculum. Accommodations are teaching supports and services that the student may require to successfully demonstrate learning. Accommodations change the "how" of learning, but do not change expectations to the curriculum grade levels. Accommodations may involve special seating, frequent breaks, or extended time on tests. Modifications are changes made to the curriculum

expectations in order to meet the needs of the student. Modifications are made when the expectations are beyond the student's level of ability. Modifications may include modified homework assignments, alternate forms of assessment such as portfolios, and changes to the curriculum. Modifications change the "what" of learning.

### Screening and Evaluation

Your school is required to have in place a screening process that identifies students who may need extra support in the general education classroom. Once learning needs are identified, teams of general, remedial, and special education teachers design and implement academic and behavioral interventions to address the needs of at-risk students (some districts refer to this as Response to Instruction and Intervention). Student progress is regularly monitored to determine if the interventions are effective. Sometimes, when the interventions have not been successful, students may be referred for special education evaluation.

The special education process begins when a teacher and/or parent suspects that the child has a disability and refers the child for an evaluation. An evaluation team gathers information to determine if the child qualifies for special education services and, if so, what services should be provided.

### Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

If the child is found to be eligible to receive special education services, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is held, during which the child's IEP is created by the IEP team. The IEP team must include the child's parent(s), a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school representative who has the authority to make decisions regarding the provision of services, and someone who can interpret the results of the evaluation. The IEP team determines the types and intensity of special education supports and services to be provided.

The IEP team writes annual goals for the student and determines how progress toward those goals will be monitored. The team also determines to what extent the student will be educated in the general education classroom, as well as which supplementary aids and services will be provided.

### Services and Supports

The IEP team must consider students' needs in the following areas: visual or hearing impairment, communication, assistive technology (AT), limited English proficiency, and behavior. The services the IEP team identifies to support students' needs may be implemented in a general and/or special education setting.

Some students require specialized instructional materials in order to access the general curriculum. Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM) are specialized formats of curricular content that can be used by learners with print disabilities. AIM includes formats such as Braille, audio, digital books, large print, and electronic text and may be used with students with sensory, physical, cognitive, or learning differences.

Students with visual impairments may require large print or Braille materials. They may also require the services of a teacher of the blind and visually impaired as well as instruction in orientation and mobility.

Students who are deaf or hard of hearing may require the services of a teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing or an educational interpreter. Their IEPs must include a communication plan that addresses their language and communication needs as they interact with school staff and peers.

AT helps students with disabilities access the general curriculum. AT devices range in complexity from low-tech tools, such as a pencil grip, to high-tech tools, such as voice-output communication devices. AT also can be a service, such as selecting or adapting devices, or training for the student and family members. For more information about AT, see *Teachers' Desk Reference: Assistive Technology*.

Some students with IEPs exhibit behaviors that require special interventions. A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) may be conducted, which involves observing the student in different settings to identify target behaviors and the events that trigger as well as maintain them. Then a positive behavior support plan is created for these students to reduce inappropriate behaviors and teach appropriate replacement behaviors.

## Discipline

Special education regulations have specific guidelines for students with disabilities regarding disciplinary suspensions and other removals from school.

Students with disabilities who engage in behavior that violates the school code of conduct may be subject to removal from school (i.e., suspension) for no more than ten consecutive school days or fifteen cumulative school days in a school year. If a student with a disability is suspended beyond the limits allowable by law, then the removal of the student is considered a change of placement and proper procedures must be followed. These procedures include a manifestation determination to determine if the behavior that warranted the change of placement was a manifestation of the student's disability or a result of the LEA's failure to implement the IEP. In addition, the IEP team will review the student's current positive behavior support plan (if one exists) and amend it as necessary. If a positive behavior support plan does not exist, then the team will conduct a functional behavioral assessment to determine why the student engaged in the problem behavior and to develop a plan to teach alternative behaviors to address the student's needs. For students with intellectual disabilities, any suspension from school, regardless of the number of days, is considered a change in placement and the above procedures must be followed. You can learn more about manifestation determination, functional behavioral assessments, and positive behavior support plans by accessing publications developed by PaTTAN at [www.pattan.net](http://www.pattan.net).

## The Role of the General Education Teacher

As a general education teacher, you may have one or more students with IEPs in your classroom and you may be on a student's IEP team. You can provide valuable information about the student's academic and behavioral strengths and needs. This information will be very useful in developing the IEP.

The following is a checklist of the responsibilities of general education teachers related to students in their classroom who receive special education services:

- Be a member of the IEP team
- Be a content expert

- Contribute to and read the IEP
- Implement the specially-designed instruction in the IEP
- Communicate with parents and teachers
- Collaborate with special educators, paraprofessionals, and related services staff
- Manage and guide personnel, such as paraprofessionals
- Monitor students' progress
- Collect and analyze data to inform instructional planning
- Access resources
- Ask questions

The concept of special education is simple. If a student has unique needs that require special education, those needs are to be determined and a program to meet those needs must be designed and carried out. As a classroom teacher, you play an important role throughout the special education process. You will be working in collaboration with other members of the student's team to promote student success by providing the services and supports they need. You are an important part of the screening and prereferral process that occurs before evaluation. You will be implementing interventions identified during screening. As a student's classroom teacher, your input will be used in determining eligibility for special education services and you will play an integral part in the development and implementation of a student's IEP, including reporting on progress and making revisions when appropriate.

When everyone involved is focused on meeting each student's individual needs, the likelihood of providing quality educational programming dramatically increases.

# Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Tom Wolf, Governor

