

# How to Read & Understand Your Child's IEP

A practical resource guide for parents of children with special needs

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a legally binding document that sets out what your child's school will provide to meet their unique learning needs. Most parents receive their first IEP as a thirty-page packet at a meeting and are asked to sign it the same day. This guide is designed to help you read the document critically, recognize what is strong and what is weak, and ask the right questions before you sign.

You do not need a legal or educational background to understand your child's IEP. You need to know which sections matter most, what good looks like in each one, and what warning signs to watch for.

## Before you read further

You have the right to take the IEP home and review it before signing. You are not required to sign at the meeting. If the team pressures you, politely say you would like time to review and will return it within a specified window.

## 1. The Sections That Actually Matter

An IEP has many sections. Three of them do most of the real work and deserve the most careful attention. If you are short on time, read these first.

Section	What It Is	Why It Matters
Present Levels (PLOP / PLAAFP)	A description of what your child can and cannot do right now, based on evaluation data.	Every other part of the IEP is supposed to flow from this. A vague baseline produces a vague plan.
Measurable Annual Goals	Specific targets the child is expected to reach within the year, with criteria for measuring progress.	These are what the school is agreeing to work toward. Vague goals cannot be enforced or monitored.
Services & Supports	The frequency, duration, group size, and provider for each service (speech, OT, resource room, etc.).	This is the operative, legally binding section. The district must provide exactly what is specified here.

## 2. Reading the Present Levels Section

The Present Levels of Performance (sometimes called PLOP or PLAAFP) is the foundation of the IEP. Read this section first and ask yourself one question: does this actually describe my child?

### What a strong Present Levels section looks like

- Specific data: scores from recent evaluations, reading levels, work samples.
- Both strengths and needs — not just a list of deficits.
- Describes how the disability affects access to the general curriculum.
- Includes input from you, the parent, and from teachers who know the child.
- Recent — based on evaluations within the last three years, ideally more recent.

### Warning signs

- Generic language that could describe any child (“struggles with reading”).
- No specific scores, grade levels, or baseline data.
- Copy-pasted from last year’s IEP with minimal changes.
- Focuses only on deficits; no description of what the child can do.
- No parent input reflected.

#### Question to ask at the meeting

“Can you point me to the specific evaluation data behind each statement in the Present Levels section?” If the team cannot, the foundation is weak.

## 3. Evaluating the Annual Goals

Every annual goal should have four components. If any are missing, the goal is not measurable and cannot be monitored properly.

Component	What It Means	Example
Condition	The circumstances under which the skill will be performed.	“Given a grade 2 reading passage...”
Behavior	The specific, observable skill the child will demonstrate.	“...will read aloud with accuracy and answer comprehension questions...”
Criterion	The standard of performance that defines mastery.	“...at 95% accuracy on decoding and 4 of 5 comprehension questions...”
Measurement	How and how often progress will be measured.	“...across 3 consecutive weekly probes, measured by the special education teacher.”

### Weak goal vs. strong goal

Weak Goal	Strong Goal
“Student will improve reading skills with 80% accuracy.”	“Given a grade 2 reading passage, student will read aloud at 95 words per minute with no more than 3 errors and answer 4 of 5 literal comprehension questions correctly, across 3 consecutive weekly probes.”

### Watch for recycled goals

If this year’s goals are last year’s goals with the accuracy criterion nudged from 75% to 80%, something is wrong. Either the child is not progressing (and instruction needs to change) or the goals were set too low to begin with.

## 4. Understanding the Services Section

The services section is where the district commits to specific, enforceable obligations. Every service listed should specify five things.

- **What** the service is (e.g., speech-language therapy, reading intervention, OT).
- **How often** it will be provided (twice weekly, daily, etc.).
- **How long** each session lasts (30 minutes, 45 minutes).
- **Group size** (individual, small group of 3, etc.).
- **Provider** (certified SLP, special education teacher, etc.).

Vague entries like “speech therapy as needed” or “support as appropriate” are not enforceable service specifications. If you see them, ask for the specifics in writing before signing.

### Accommodations vs. modifications

	Accommodations	Modifications
What changes	How the child accesses the material (extended time, audio books, preferential seating).	What the child is expected to learn (reduced content, alternate curriculum, different standards).
Effect on content	Content stays the same.	Content is changed, often at a lower level.
Typical use	When the child can master grade-level content with support.	When grade-level content is not currently accessible.

### More is not better

An accommodations list with fifteen generic items often signals that no one on the team carefully matched accommodations to your child's specific deficits. Three well-chosen accommodations that are actually used will do more than fifteen that sit on paper.

## 5. Placement and Least Restrictive Environment

Federal law requires that your child be educated in the **least restrictive environment (LRE)** in which their needs can be met. The default is the general education classroom with supports. More restrictive placements must be justified based on your child's needs, not the district's convenience or scheduling.

### The placement continuum, from least to most restrictive

- General education classroom with consultation or push-in services.
- Co-taught classroom (general ed teacher plus special ed teacher).
- General education with pull-out services for part of the day.
- Resource room (self-contained period, mainstream for the rest of the day).
- Self-contained classroom (full-day, smaller ratio).
- Specialized program or school (when district cannot meet needs).

### Question to ask at the meeting

"What supports were attempted in a less restrictive setting, and why did they not work?" A more restrictive placement should be backed by data, not by the fact that the district already runs that program.

## 6. Before You Sign

Signing the IEP means you consent to the plan as written. A few practical points:

- You can take the IEP home to review — you are not required to sign at the meeting.
- You can partially consent: agree to parts of the IEP (so those services begin) while negotiating other parts.
- You can request changes in writing. The team must respond.
- If you disagree with the evaluation behind the IEP, you can request an **Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)** at district expense.
- If you disagree with the final IEP, you have several dispute options: mediation, a state complaint, or a due process hearing.

## Parent Checklist: Reviewing an IEP

Use this checklist as you read through the document. If you answer "no" to several items, raise those issues before signing.

## Present Levels

<input type="checkbox"/>	Does this section accurately describe my child's current functioning?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is it based on recent evaluation data (not just teacher observation)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does it reflect input I provided as a parent?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Does it describe both strengths and needs?

## Goals

<input type="checkbox"/>	Does each goal have a condition, behavior, criterion, and measurement method?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the goals ambitious but realistic given the Present Levels?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the goals meaningfully different from last year's?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Is there a goal for every area of identified need?

## Services

<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the frequency, duration, group size, and provider specified for each service?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do the services match the goals — is there a service for every goal?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are any services described vaguely ("as needed," "as appropriate")?

## Accommodations & Modifications

<input type="checkbox"/>	Is each accommodation matched to a specific functional need?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the accommodations actually going to be used in class?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do I know who is responsible for implementing each one?

## Placement

<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the placement in the least restrictive environment where my child's needs can be met?
<input type="checkbox"/>	If the placement is restrictive, is the justification based on my child's needs, not district convenience?

## Progress Reporting

	Is there a clear schedule for progress reports?
	Will reports include actual data, not just “making progress” language?
	Have all of my child’s teachers been given a copy of the IEP?

## Glossary of Common IEP Terms

<b>IDEA</b>	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act — the federal law governing special education.
<b>IEP</b>	Individualized Education Program — the written plan required for each student eligible for special education under IDEA.
<b>504 Plan</b>	A plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act providing accommodations for students with disabilities who do not need specially designed instruction. Not the same as an IEP.
<b>FAPE</b>	Free Appropriate Public Education — the legal standard the district must meet.
<b>LRE</b>	Least Restrictive Environment — the requirement that students be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
<b>PLOP / PLAAFP</b>	Present Levels of Performance / Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance — the baseline section of the IEP.
<b>SDI</b>	Specially Designed Instruction — instruction adapted to meet a child’s unique needs. The core of what special education provides.
<b>IEE</b>	Independent Educational Evaluation — an evaluation by a qualified professional not employed by the district, which parents can request at district expense if they disagree with the district’s evaluation.
<b>Prior Written Notice</b>	A written explanation the district must provide when it proposes or refuses to take action regarding your child’s identification, evaluation, placement, or FAPE.
<b>Due Process</b>	A formal legal procedure for resolving disputes between parents and the district.

### **A note on this guide**

This guide is for general information and parent education. It is not legal advice. Special education law involves federal requirements under IDEA plus state-specific regulations and timelines that vary by jurisdiction. If your child's IEP is in dispute or the district is not complying with the plan as written, consider consulting a special education advocate or attorney in your state.