



THE EMPOWERED PROJECT

The IEP & 504 Support Guide

*Understanding Your Child's Rights and Advocating
with Confidence.*

A BLACK MOM ISH FOUNDATION RESOURCE

FROM THE FOUNDATION

Welcome

This guide exists because too many parents walk into their first IEP or 504 meeting without knowing the vocabulary, the timeline, or their own rights. That gap costs kids support they are entitled to, and it costs parents confidence they should have walked in with.

We built this to close that gap.

Inside, you will find a practical roadmap: the laws, the process, the vocabulary, and the questions worth asking before you sign anything. You will also find a section written specifically for what it means to be a Black mother in that room, because that experience is real and it deserves its own space here, not a footnote.

Read it front to back before your first meeting, or keep it close and flip to what you need in the moment. Either way, you are not figuring this out alone.

— *The Black Mom Ish Foundation*

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SECTION ONE

IEP vs. 504: Understanding the Difference

An IEP and a 504 plan both exist to support kids who need something different from the standard classroom setup. They come from different laws, cover different ground, and open different doors. Here is how they compare.

	IEP	504 PLAN
Governing law	IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
What it provides	Specialized, individualized instruction, plus related services like speech or occupational therapy	Accommodations so a student can access the same general curriculum as their peers
Eligibility standard	Child must fit one of 13 federal disability categories and need specialized instruction as a result	Any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, a broader standard
Who writes it	A full IEP team: parent, teachers, and specialists	A smaller team, sometimes just the 504 coordinator and parent
Review cycle	Reviewed at least annually, with a full reevaluation every 3 years	Reviewed periodically, timing varies by district
Legal protections	Comes with far more extensive procedural safeguards	Fewer procedural safeguards than an IEP

A child can hold a 504 plan and later move to an IEP if their needs turn out to require specialized instruction, not just accommodations. Neither path is a permanent label.

SECTION TWO

The Words You'll Hear: A Glossary

Part 1 of 2. This vocabulary gets thrown around fast in meetings. Here it is, defined plainly.

IEP

Individualized Education Program. The legal document that lays out a child's specialized instruction, related services, and goals.

FAPE

Free Appropriate Public Education. The federal guarantee that every eligible child receives an education tailored to their needs, at no cost to the family.

IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal law that governs the IEP process nationwide.

Related Services

Support like speech therapy, occupational therapy, or counseling that helps a child benefit from their instruction.

504

A plan under Section 504 that provides accommodations so a student can access the general curriculum alongside their peers.

LRE

Least Restrictive Environment. The requirement that a child be educated alongside non-disabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate.

ESY

Extended School Year. Services provided outside the regular school year for kids who need them to avoid losing ground.

Present Levels / PLAAFP

Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance. The snapshot of where a child stands right now, the foundation the whole IEP is built on.

Part 2 of 2, continued.

Accommodations vs. Modifications

Accommodations change how a student accesses material, like extra time or a quiet space. Modifications change what they are expected to learn.

Eligibility

The determination, made by the team after evaluation, of whether a child qualifies for services and under which category.

Due Process

The formal legal route for resolving a disagreement between a parent and a school that cannot be settled another way.

Prior Written Notice

A written explanation the school must give a parent before it changes, or refuses to change, a child's identification, evaluation, or placement.

Case Manager

The staff member, often the special education teacher, who coordinates a child's plan and is usually the parent's main point of contact.

Evaluation

The formal assessment process used to determine whether a child qualifies for an IEP or 504 plan, and what they need.

Procedural Safeguards

The set of legal rights and protections given to parents throughout the special education process.

IEE

Independent Educational Evaluation. An evaluation by someone outside the school district, which a parent can request at public expense if they disagree with the school's findings.

Child Find

The school's legal obligation to identify, locate, and evaluate children who may need special education services.

SECTION THREE

How the Process Works: From Concern to Plan

- 1 Notice a concern.** Either you notice it, or the school flags it through Child Find, its obligation to identify kids who may need support.
- 2 Request an evaluation in writing.** A verbal request is valid, but a written one starts the clock and creates a record.
- 3 Consent and evaluation.** Once you sign consent, federal law requires the evaluation be completed within 60 calendar days. Many states set their own shorter timeline that overrides the federal default, so confirm your state's timeline.
- 4 Eligibility meeting.** The team reviews the evaluation results together and determines whether your child qualifies for services.
- 5 The IEP is developed.** If your child is found eligible, federal law requires the IEP be written within 30 calendar days of that determination.
- 6 Services begin.** The plan is implemented in the classroom.
- 7 Annual review and reevaluation.** The plan is reviewed at least once a year, with a full reevaluation at least every 3 years.

SECTION FOUR

Preparing for the Meeting

You do not have to walk in cold. A little preparation changes the whole tone of the room.

- ☐ Request the evaluation report and any draft goals in advance, rather than seeing them for the first time in the room.
- ☐ Bring your own written observations of your child, from home and outside of school.
- ☐ Know that you can request specific team members attend the meeting.
- ☐ Bring a support person or advocate. This is a parent's right, not a special request.
- ☐ Request an interpreter in advance if you need one.
- ☐ Walk in with your top 3 priorities identified, so the conversation does not drift.

SECTION FIVE

Your Rights as a Parent

The school must give you a Procedural Safeguards Notice, explaining your rights in full.

You are a full member of the team. Every decision requires your input.

You can request an Independent Educational Evaluation at public expense if you disagree with the school's evaluation.

You can request an IEP or 504 meeting at any time, not only at the annual review.

You must receive written notice before certain changes are made.

You have the right to review your child's complete educational record.

If you disagree with the school's decisions, you can pursue mediation or file a formal due process complaint.

SECTION SIX

Showing Up as a Black Mother in the Room

This part is written for you specifically, because what you carry into that room is real, and it deserves to be named before we get to the tools.

Black students, and Black boys especially, are identified for special education and referred for exclusionary discipline at disproportionately higher rates than their peers nationally. It is a pattern well documented enough that federal law requires states to monitor it.

Many Black mothers walk into that room already having to prove their child's struggle is real, or already fighting an assumption that their child is a behavior problem rather than a kid who needs support. If that has been your experience, you are not imagining it, and you are not alone in it.

You can hold both things at once: the process exists to help your child, and you may have to advocate harder within it than another parent would. Here is how to do that well.

PRACTICAL TOOLS

- Document everything in writing. Emails, notes, dates, and who said what.
- Trust your read of your child over a label being suggested to you.
- Ask directly for the data behind a recommendation. You are entitled to see it.
- Bring an advocate if the dynamic feels adversarial.
- Know that requesting a second opinion is a right, not an inconvenience to the school.

SECTION SEVEN

Words That Work

A few real phrases, ready to use in the room. Not a script, just a starting point.

"Can we put that agreement in writing before I sign anything today."

"I don't agree with that goal as written. Here's why."

"I'd like to request an independent educational evaluation."

"Can you walk me through the data behind that recommendation."

"I need some time to review this before I sign."

SECTION EIGHT

After the Meeting

Review the written plan

Check it against what was actually discussed and agreed to. What's on paper is what governs.

Know what comes next

Understand what deadlines now apply, and when the next review is due.

Know how to request a change

You do not have to wait for the annual cycle if something is not working.

Keep a paper trail

A simple folder, physical or digital, with every evaluation, plan, and email. Future you will thank present you.

SECTION NINE

Know Your Team

A quick who's who for the people you'll meet across this process.

ROLE	WHAT THEY DO	WHEN TO LOOP THEM IN
Case Manager / Special Ed Teacher	Coordinates the plan day to day and delivers specialized instruction	Your default point of contact for anything ongoing
School Psychologist	Conducts evaluations and assessments	When you have questions about testing or results
504 Coordinator	Oversees 504 plans specifically	For anything related to a 504, not an IEP
Director of Special Ed / Pupil Services	Oversees special education across the district	When an issue can't get resolved at the school level
General Education Teacher	Teaches your child day to day in the general classroom	For how the plan is actually playing out in class
Related Service Providers (OT, PT, SLP)	Deliver specific services like occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech-language support	For questions about a specific service your child receives
You, the Parent	A full, equal member of the team with legal decision-making input	Every step, from evaluation to annual review

SECTION TEN

Free Resources You Should Know About

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs)

Federally funded, free, and available in every state and territory. They offer one-on-one help, workshops, and training on exactly this process. Find your state's center through the Center for Parent Information and Resources at parentcenterhub.org.

State Departments of Education also publish their own special education parent guides and timelines. Worth checking, since state rules can be stricter than the federal minimum described in this guide.

SECTION ELEVEN

Quick Reference Checklist

- ☐ **IEP vs. 504:** know which one fits, an IEP for specialized instruction, a 504 for accommodations.
- ☐ **The glossary:** learn FAPE, LRE, and PLAAFP before your first meeting.
- ☐ **The process:** request evaluation in writing, that's what starts the clock.
- ☐ **Preparing:** get the evaluation report in advance and set your top 3 priorities.
- ☐ **Your rights:** you can request an IEE at public expense if you disagree with the school.
- ☐ **Showing up:** document everything, and trust your read of your child.
- ☐ **Words that work:** "I need some time to review this before I sign."
- ☐ **After the meeting:** check the written plan against what was agreed to.
- ☐ **Know your team:** keep your case manager's contact info on hand.
- ☐ **Free resources:** find your state's PTI at parentcenterhub.org.
- ☐ **Paper trail:** keep every evaluation, plan, and email in one folder.

BEFORE YOU GO

Closing Note

You made it through this guide, which means you are already doing the work most parents never get handed the tools to do. Keep it close through your first meeting, your fifth, and every annual review after that.

This is one guide in a growing library from the EmpowerED Project. We are building out more of these, on more of what Black families navigate in school systems, and we want to build the ones you actually need.

Tell us what guide would help you next. We are listening.

— *The Black Mom Ish Foundation*

You don't have to figure this out alone.

FIND FREE HELP IN YOUR STATE

Every state has a federally funded Parent Training and Information Center offering free, one-on-one help with this exact process, regardless of income. Find yours at **parentcenterhub.org**.

IN ILLINOIS

Family Matters Parent Training and Information Center

1-866-436-7842 (1-866-4FMPTIC) · fmptic.org

Serves families across the entire state of Illinois, free of charge.



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