



Helpful Special Education Acronyms, Abbreviations, and Definitions

Navigating public education in general is no easy task. Special education comes with its own language, full of frequently used acronyms and abbreviations that you need to understand. This sheet is designed to give definitions of commonly used terms as you navigate special education and related services in the District.

504 Plan: a plan for how a child with a disability or impairment will be provided with a “Free Appropriate Public Education” to ensure a child has the same access to the learning environment as their non-impaired peers; protects rights of kids with disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Accommodation: a change made to instruction that affects how a student learns material

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): federal law that defines disability and prohibits discrimination by employers, facilities open to the general public, and state or local public agencies that provide services

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): a plan put in place to help a child learn social skills and behavior; should include positive interventions

Child Find: process that ensures that all children with disabilities and in need of special education and related services are identified, located, and evaluated

Disability: a substantially limiting physical or mental impairment affecting basic life activities

Due Process: the legal process for resolving disputes between families and schools regarding special education identification, evaluation or placement

Early Stages: DC Public Schools (DCPS)’ assessment center for children between the ages of 2 years and 8 months and 5 years and 10 months that helps to identify delays a child may have and to arrange services to address them

Family Education Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA): federal law that protects the privacy of a student’s education records and a parent’s right to view their child’s files

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): education that is individualized to a student’s needs and appropriate to help the student make meaningful progress; guaranteed under IDEA



Individualized Education Program (IEP): a plan for how a child with a qualifying disability will be provided a “Free Appropriate Public Education” to ensure a child can make meaningful education progress; required for students receiving special education services under IDEA

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): federal law with funds that ensure states meet the needs of students with disabilities

Local Education Agency (LEA): a traditional school district or charter network (ex. DCPS, KIPP, DC Prep, Excel)

Least Restrictive Environment: a term that means the special education placement is as close as possible to the general education environment; required under IDEA

Manifestation Determination: a review of the relationship between a student’s disability and demonstrated behavior that resulted in disciplinary action

Modification: a change made to curriculum that affects how a student learns material

Prior Written Notice: requires LEAs to inform parents in writing what services they are and are not providing and why during the IEP process

Response to Intervention (RTI): process used by educators to help students struggling with a skill or lesson; each teacher will use interventions (a set of teaching procedures) with the student to help them succeed in the classroom; applies to both general education and special education

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: a federal civil rights law to ensure students with disabilities aren’t discriminated against

Service Provider: an entity whose function is the delivery of a social service or resource

Special Education (SPED): instruction specially designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities; special education and related services are provided at no cost to parents and can include special instruction in the classroom, at home, in hospitals or institutions, or in other settings

Strong Start: DC’s early intervention program that provides services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays; run by Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)