

# Special Education Law Glossary

## The Words They Use — and What They Actually Mean

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IEP meetings, evaluations, and hearings are full of jargon. School districts use technical language every day. You shouldn't have to guess what it means when your child's rights are on the line. Use this glossary to follow every conversation and ask better questions.

<b>Annual Goals</b>	The specific, measurable things your child is expected to accomplish by the next IEP meeting. Every goal should be written clearly enough that you can tell whether your child met it. Vague goals are a red flag.
<b>Assessment / Evaluation</b>	A series of tests used to figure out whether your child qualifies for special education and what they need. The district must test in every area where your child might have a disability — not just academics.
<b>Assistive Technology (AT)</b>	Any tool that helps your child participate in school despite their disability — from a specialized pencil grip to a text-to-speech app to a full communication device. If your child needs it to access their education, it must be in the IEP.
<b>BIP — Behavior Intervention Plan</b>	A written plan for addressing behavior that gets in the way of your child's learning. A good BIP focuses on teaching better behavior, not just punishing the old behavior. If your child has been disciplined repeatedly, ask for one.
<b>Child Find</b>	The legal obligation every school district has to actively seek out children with disabilities — even if the family hasn't asked. If you think your child has a disability, the district is required to evaluate them.
<b>Compensatory Education</b>	Extra services your child is entitled to receive as make-up for services the district failed to provide. If your child was denied FAPE for a period of time, compensatory education is how that gap gets filled.
<b>Due Process</b>	A formal legal hearing before a neutral judge when you and the district cannot agree. See our Due Process Filing Guide for a full explanation.
<b>ESY — Extended School Year</b>	Special education services provided over the summer or school breaks when your child would lose significant skills without them. If your child regresses over breaks, ask the IEP team about ESY — the district must consider it.

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<b>FAPE — Free Appropriate Public Education</b>	The cornerstone right of special education law. Your child is entitled to an education that meets their unique needs, at no cost to your family. "Appropriate" doesn't mean the best possible — but it must be genuinely educational, not just babysitting.
<b>FBA — Functional Behavioral Assessment</b>	An investigation into why your child behaves a certain way — what triggers the behavior and what your child is getting out of it. The FBA is used to build the BIP. Without a good FBA, the BIP is just guessing.
<b>IDEA — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act</b>	The federal law that gives your child the right to special education. IDEA covers children ages 3–21 and requires schools to provide a free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment with an individualized plan.
<b>IEE — Independent Educational Evaluation</b>	An evaluation done by someone outside the school district, which parents can request when they disagree with the district's assessment. In most cases, the district must pay for it. This is one of the most underused parent rights in special education.
<b>IEP — Individualized Education Program</b>	The written plan that describes everything your child is entitled to: their current performance levels, annual goals, services, placement, and accommodations. It is a legal document. Read every word before signing.
<b>LRE — Least Restrictive Environment</b>	The law requires your child to be educated alongside non-disabled students as much as possible. Removing a child to a separate class or school requires justification. If the district is pushing for a more separate placement, ask why — in writing.
<b>Manifestation Determination</b>	When your child with a disability faces serious discipline (like suspension of more than 10 days), the district must hold this meeting to decide whether the behavior was caused by the disability. If it was, typical discipline cannot apply.
<b>Mediation</b>	A free, voluntary, confidential process where a neutral mediator helps you and the district reach an agreement. It does not waive your right to due process. Many families resolve their disputes here without ever going to a hearing.
<b>OAH — Office of Administrative Hearings</b>	The California state agency that runs special education due process hearings. Hearings are conducted by Administrative Law Judges who are completely independent of the school district.

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**Prior Written Notice (PWN)** A document the district must give you before they make any change to your child's identification, evaluation, or placement — or when they refuse to make a change you requested. It must explain their reasoning. If you didn't get one, ask.

**Related Services** The support services your child needs to actually benefit from their education: speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, counseling, transportation, and more. These must be written into the IEP and delivered consistently.

**Section 504** A civil rights law that protects students with disabilities who don't qualify under IDEA. A 504 Plan provides accommodations (like extra time on tests) but not specialized instruction. If your child was denied IDEA eligibility, ask about 504.

**State Complaint** A complaint filed with the California Department of Education when a district violates IDEA rules. The CDE must investigate and respond within 60 days — faster than due process and useful for clear procedural violations.

**Transition Services** For students 16 and older, the IEP must include a plan for life after high school: college, vocational training, employment, independent living. If your teenager's IEP doesn't address this, it's missing a legal requirement.

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**Now you know the words. Let us help you use them.**

*Understanding the terminology is step one. Attorney Phillip Sparks can help you figure out what your child is specifically entitled to and what to do when the district falls short. Call us for a free, no-pressure consultation.*

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