

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

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The Individuals with Disabilities [Education Act](#), commonly called IDEA, is the principal United States federal law governing special education for eligible children with disabilities. The original toolbox focuses on behavior, comprehension, oral language, vocabulary, content-area reading, and spelling. Those instructional components remain useful, but the legal discussion needs correction. IDEA was not created only to eliminate “inappropriate behavior,” and it does not define disability as a collection of negative personality traits. Its central purpose is to ensure that eligible children receive a free appropriate public education, or FAPE, through special education and related services designed to meet individual needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. When behavior impedes learning, the IEP team must consider positive behavioral interventions and supports rather than relying primarily on exclusion or punishment.

IDEA’s Main Purpose

IDEA protects educational rights for children whose disabilities meet statutory categories and who need special education. The law requires identification and evaluation, parent participation, an individualized education program, appropriate services, procedural safeguards, and education in the least restrictive environment. Eligibility is not based merely on low grades or difficult behavior. A multidisciplinary evaluation considers whether the child has an eligible disability and needs specially designed instruction.

The law also protects families’ participation. Parents receive notice, access to records, opportunities to attend and contribute to IEP meetings, and methods for resolving disputes. Students should be involved increasingly as they mature, especially when transition planning begins. The IEP is not a plan written for the child without the child and family.

The Individualized Education Program

An IEP is a written program developed by a team that includes parents, relevant teachers, a public-agency representative, a person able to interpret evaluation results, and others with knowledge or expertise as appropriate. The team considers the child’s strengths, parent concerns, evaluation results, and academic, developmental, and functional needs. The IEP includes present levels of performance, measurable annual goals, services, supports, accommodations, participation decisions, and methods for measuring progress.

IDEA requires the IEP to be reviewed at least annually and revised when progress is insufficient, evaluation provides new information, needs change, or other matters arise. An IEP should therefore operate as a living educational plan rather than a compliance document placed in a file.

Behavior Under IDEA

The original essay cites regulations using inaccurate section numbers and suggests that IDEA's purpose is to remove negative behaviors from children. The correct requirement is found at 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(i): when a child's behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, the IEP team must consider positive behavioral interventions and supports and other strategies. The focus is on access, learning, safety, communication, and skill development—not correcting a child's personality.

Behavior communicates function. A student may avoid work that is inaccessible, seek sensory input, respond to trauma, attempt to gain attention, escape overwhelming noise, or lack a more effective communication skill. Calling the behavior "aggression" or "intolerance" without examining context does not tell the team what to do.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive behavioral interventions teach and reinforce appropriate skills while changing conditions that contribute to problem behavior. Supports may include predictable routines, explicit expectations, visual schedules, communication instruction, choice, environmental modification, reinforcement, coping strategies, breaks, and staff support. Positive does not mean permissive. Schools can maintain clear boundaries while teaching the behavior needed to meet those boundaries.

Interventions should be individualized and based on evidence. A reward system may help one student and be ineffective or inappropriate for another. The team monitors whether the support improves learning and reduces harm and changes the plan when evidence shows it is not working.

Functional Behavioral Assessment

A functional behavioral assessment, or FBA, gathers information about the conditions preceding and following behavior and develops a hypothesis about its function. Data may include interviews, direct observation, record review, task analysis, and patterns across time and setting. The purpose is not to assign blame or find a hidden motive with certainty. It is to guide effective intervention.

IDEA discipline rules require functional assessment and behavioral services in specified circumstances and allow teams to use them proactively. When conduct is determined to be a manifestation of the child's disability and a change of placement occurred, the team generally must conduct an FBA and implement a behavior intervention plan unless one already exists, in which case it reviews and

modifies the plan as necessary.

Behavior Intervention Plans

A behavior intervention plan translates assessment into action. It defines the behavior observably, identifies likely function, describes prevention, teaches replacement skills, establishes staff responses, and specifies data collection. A plan should not consist only of consequences after an incident. If a student throws work to escape reading that is far beyond the student's level, repeated punishment leaves the instructional mismatch untouched.

Implementation fidelity matters. A well-designed plan cannot be evaluated fairly when staff use it inconsistently. Teachers and service providers must be informed of their responsibilities under the IEP. When incidents continue, the team should ask whether supports were delivered, whether the hypothesis was accurate, and whether circumstances changed.

Discipline and Continued Education

Students with disabilities remain subject to school conduct rules, but IDEA provides procedural protections when removal becomes significant. The team may need to determine whether conduct was caused by or had a direct and substantial relationship to the disability or resulted from failure to implement the IEP. Even during certain removals, the student must continue receiving educational services sufficient to participate in the general curriculum and progress toward IEP goals.

These protections do not excuse dangerous behavior. They prevent schools from using exclusion as a substitute for appropriate special education and behavioral support. Safety planning and accountability should be combined with continued access to education.

Least Restrictive Environment

IDEA requires children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Removal from the regular educational environment occurs only when education there cannot be achieved satisfactorily with supplementary aids and services. Least restrictive environment is an individualized decision, not a fixed location or assumption that every student requires the same placement.

Supports may include co-teaching, paraprofessional assistance, accessible materials, assistive technology, environmental modification, related services, and teacher consultation. Inclusion is meaningful only when the student participates and learns rather than being physically present without access.

Literacy Instruction Within the IEP

The original toolbox emphasizes reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and spelling. These areas can be addressed through specially designed instruction when evaluation and IEP goals identify need. The instructional plan should connect with grade-level standards while providing explicit support at the child's current skill level. Access to the general curriculum and remediation are both important; one should not replace the other automatically.

Instruction should use evidence-based methods to the extent practicable and be adjusted according to progress monitoring. A strategy becomes part of an individualized plan because data indicate it is needed, not merely because it appears in a generic toolbox.

Comprehension Strategies: Questioning, Analyzing, and Evaluating

Comprehension involves constructing meaning from text, images, speech, and multimedia. Teachers can model how to ask questions before, during, and after reading; identify main ideas; infer meaning; evaluate evidence; and summarize. Students benefit from seeing the invisible thinking process demonstrated explicitly. A teacher may read a passage aloud and explain why a particular detail changes an interpretation.

Questions should move beyond recall while remaining accessible. Literal understanding provides a foundation, and analytical questions ask how or why. Supports may include preteaching vocabulary, chunking text, graphic organizers, audio access, repeated reading, and collaborative discussion. Students should not be judged as lacking critical thought simply because decoding or language demands obstruct expression.

Media Message Activity

The original procedure asks students to interpret media and create an advertisement for peers. This can develop comprehension and communication when designed carefully. Students can identify the intended audience, claim, evidence, visual choices, emotional appeal, and missing information. They can then create a health message that is accurate, accessible, and ethically persuasive.

The activity should not require a student to disclose personal health, body image, disability, or family experience. Advertising also introduces commercial persuasion, so students should learn to distinguish education from manipulation. Accessibility may include captions, alternative text, clear language, and readable contrast.

Oral Language

Oral language supports vocabulary, comprehension, writing, social interaction, and classroom participation. The original toolbox recommends mental imagery, labeling, and connecting ideas. Teachers can also use structured conversation, sentence frames, retelling, debate, storytelling, and explicit instruction in academic language. Students need opportunities to speak for authentic purposes rather than only answer brief teacher questions.

Communication differences require individualized support. A student may use augmentative and alternative communication, sign language, an interpreter, speech-generating technology, or additional processing time. Oral language goals should not assume speech is the only valid form of communication.

Mental Imagery and Visualization

Creating mental images can help some students represent descriptions, sequences, and relationships. A teacher can model imagery by describing what is pictured and linking details to the text. Students may draw, select images, manipulate objects, or explain sensory details. Visualization is a strategy, not proof that a student has a fixed visual learning style.

Some learners may not experience vivid mental imagery and can still comprehend through other methods. Instruction should offer options without labeling students according to one preferred channel.

Vocabulary Instruction

The original word-map procedure remains useful. A word map may include definition, synonyms, antonyms, examples, nonexamples, word parts, pronunciation, and use in a sentence. Students learn vocabulary more effectively when words appear repeatedly in meaningful contexts rather than as isolated lists.

Teachers should select high-utility academic terms and essential content vocabulary. Morphology—prefixes, suffixes, and roots—helps students analyze unfamiliar words. Multiple-meaning words and figurative language may require explicit explanation. Progress can be assessed through use and comprehension, not only memorized definitions.

Content-Area Reading

Reading in science, mathematics, history, and other subjects requires discipline-specific strategies.

Scientific text may explain processes and evidence; history may compare sources and perspective; mathematics compresses meaning into symbols; technical subjects use diagrams and procedures. A generic reading strategy should be adapted to the demands of the discipline.

The original procedure recommends dividing assignments into phases, predicting, discussing, and writing. Before reading, students can activate relevant knowledge and preview structure. During reading, they annotate evidence and clarify vocabulary. After reading, they explain, apply, compare, or evaluate. Prediction should be checked against the text so it develops reasoning rather than guesswork.

Spelling and Written Language

Spelling instruction can include phonemic awareness, sound-symbol relationships, syllable patterns, morphology, word origins, and self-correction. The original toolbox appropriately moves from simple to complex patterns. Weekly tests alone may measure short-term memorization without transferring to writing. Instruction should connect spelling patterns with reading and composition.

Assistive technology such as spell-check, word prediction, speech-to-text, and audiobooks can provide access while explicit instruction continues. Using technology is not cheating when it is included as an accommodation or instructional support. Students should learn how to review automated suggestions because software can introduce incorrect words.

Progress Monitoring

Measurable IEP goals require baseline data and repeated monitoring. A goal should specify the skill, conditions, level of performance, and method of measurement. Data may come from curriculum-based measures, work samples, observation, rubrics, reading probes, or behavior records. The team reports progress to parents according to the IEP.

Data should guide decisions, not merely prove that sessions occurred. If progress is insufficient, the team considers instructional intensity, method, attendance, accessibility, health, implementation, and whether the goal remains appropriate. Repeating an ineffective intervention for an entire year is not individualized education.

Family and Student Participation

Parents provide information about strengths, communication, history, culture, health, and what works outside school. They should receive explanations in understandable language and interpretation when needed. Disagreement should be documented and addressed through collaborative problem-solving and procedural safeguards rather than treated as interference.

Students can help identify goals, accommodations, interests, and strategies. Participation supports self-advocacy, especially during transition to employment, education, and adult services. A student should understand the IEP as support for access and growth, not as a label defining limitations.

Equity and Avoiding Stigma

Disability, race, language, poverty, and discipline can interact in ways that produce unequal identification or exclusion. Teams should distinguish disability-related need from limited instruction, cultural difference, or English-language development. Behavioral descriptions should be observable and avoid labels such as “bad,” “aggressive personality,” or “unmotivated” without evidence.

Positive support does not mean lowering expectations. It means making expectations teachable and accessible while protecting dignity. Students with disabilities remain entitled to challenge, creativity, relationships, and meaningful participation.

Conclusion

IDEA ensures individualized special education and related services for eligible children with disabilities and protects family participation, procedural rights, and access to the general curriculum. When behavior impedes learning, the IEP team must consider positive behavioral interventions and supports. Functional assessment and behavior plans can identify why behavior occurs, prevent predictable difficulty, teach replacement skills, and reduce reliance on exclusion. The original literacy toolbox remains valuable when strategies are individualized: comprehension instruction can model questioning and evaluation; oral-language support can include multiple communication modes; word maps can deepen vocabulary; content reading can be taught by discipline; and spelling can combine phonemic, orthographic, and morphological knowledge. The law does not seek to remove a child’s personality. It requires schools to identify needs, build on strengths, monitor progress, and provide the support necessary for meaningful education.

References

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.

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