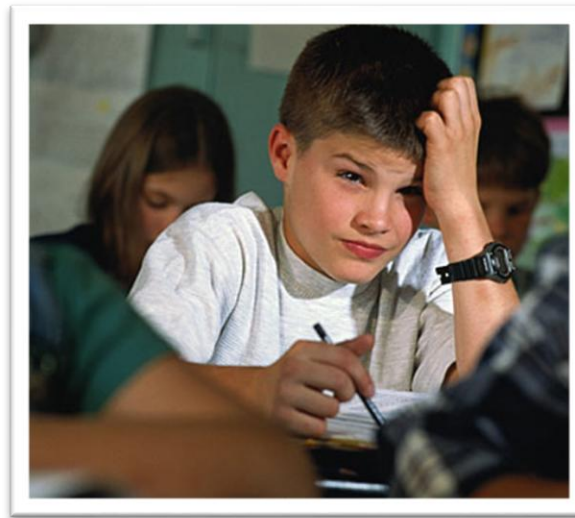




Special Education

Ten Tips for Advocating for Your Child

September 12, 2026



About this presentation

[The Arc of King County](#) is a member of the state's [Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network](#).

This presentation was part of a series of webinars we created to support families navigating schools, and to support school staff in working with families of children with disabilities.

You can access these webinars and materials on our website.



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<https://bit.ly/IncludeIDD>



NAVIGATING SCHOOLS

Accessibility & Belonging

Special Education Basics

Conceptos básicos de educación especial

A series for families using special education services.

Produced by The Arc of King County for the state's Inclusionary Practices Technical Network.

Family Engagement Collaborative



Who we are ...

The Arc of King County promotes and protects the rights of people with intellectual or other developmental disabilities (IDD) so we can all live, learn, work and play in the community.

The Arc is a national organization with local chapters. We are driven by the fundamental belief that everyone deserves to write their own life story. That means:

- Real access to education
- Meaningful employment
- Quality healthcare
- Genuine community connections

At our chapter, we offer information and support, and systems navigation, and public policy and civic engagement support. We also run a supported living program for adults with IDD.

We help (or refer!) on any topic. The most common are special education, housing, Medicaid long-term supports, and future planning.

<https://arcofkingcounty.org/>



Need assistance? ask@arcofkingcounty.org

Today's presenter:

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Today we will cover :

- The legal basics
- What is an IEP?
- IEP vs. 504 Plans
- Evaluations and the IEP process
- Data, goal writing and personalized learning plans
- Inclusion and placement decisions
- Challenging behaviors
- The advocacy hierarchy
- Options for conflict resolutions
- Working with the IEP team



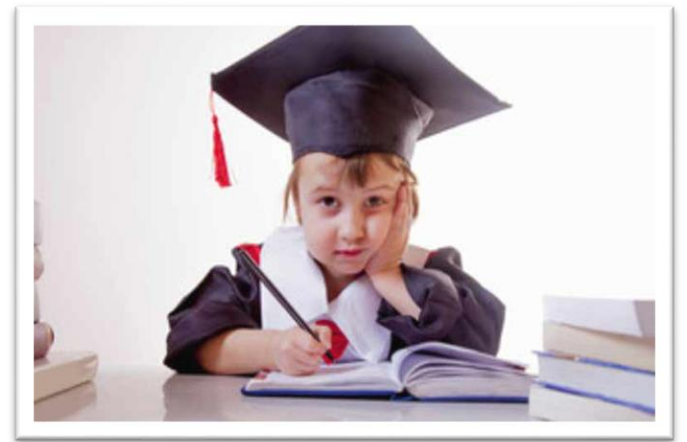
Tip #1. Understand the legal basics

Section 504 and the ADA

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 established civil rights for people with disabilities. It applies to programs that receive federal funding. The Americans with Disabilities Act followed in 1990 and expanded those rights to state and local programs and places of public accommodation. These laws say you cannot discriminate based on disability and you must provide reasonable accommodations. They include an **integration mandate**. These laws protect ALL people with disabilities.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

A federal law that lays out requirements for a program of special education services for students preK-12. It includes certain rights and protections for qualifying students and families, including the right to a **free and appropriate public education** (FAPE) in the least restricted environment. It was first passed in 1975 and has been revised over the years. It applies only to students who have certain disabilities and who ALSO require specially designed instruction to access general education.



Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Children have a right not to be segregated. IDEA presumes students with disabilities will be educated in the general education setting, WITH the services and accommodations needed to make it accessible. **Removal should only occur when even with support, education cannot be achieved satisfactorily.** Students do not have to prove they belong.



A child with a disability has a right to an education with their general education peers and is entitled to make substantial progress in their learning. Challenging behavior, complex medical needs, an international pandemic, or unique learning requirements do not diminish those rights in any way.

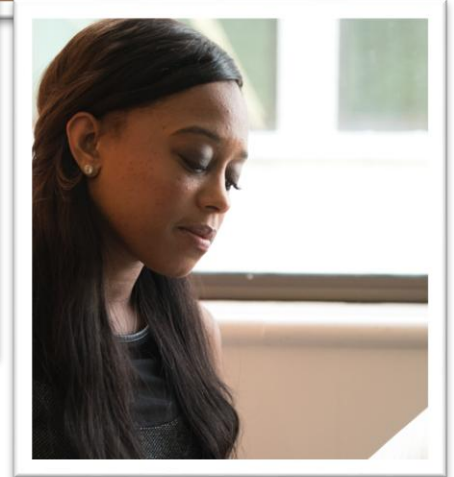
Tip # 2. Know what an IEP is

An Individualized education program (IEP) is a legally binding contract that lays out the specialized instruction, supports, and services a student needs to make progress and thrive in school.

A parent is an equal member of the IEP team. Students are also members of the IEP team. Parents have the right to request a meeting at any time.

All IEPs look different, but all should include the following:

- ✓ Present Levels of Performance
- ✓ Annual goals
- ✓ Specialized education and related services, including supplementary aids and services
- ✓ Accommodations
- ✓ How much of the school day the child will be educated away from their nondisabled peers
- ✓ How often services will be provided, where they will be provided, how long they'll last (service matrix)



Tip # 3. Know the difference between IEPs and 504 plans

Individualized Education Program (IEP): Will include accommodations, along with goals, service matrix and more



Modifications are changes to the general education curriculum, will only appear on an IEP, and will change **WHAT** is being taught or learned.

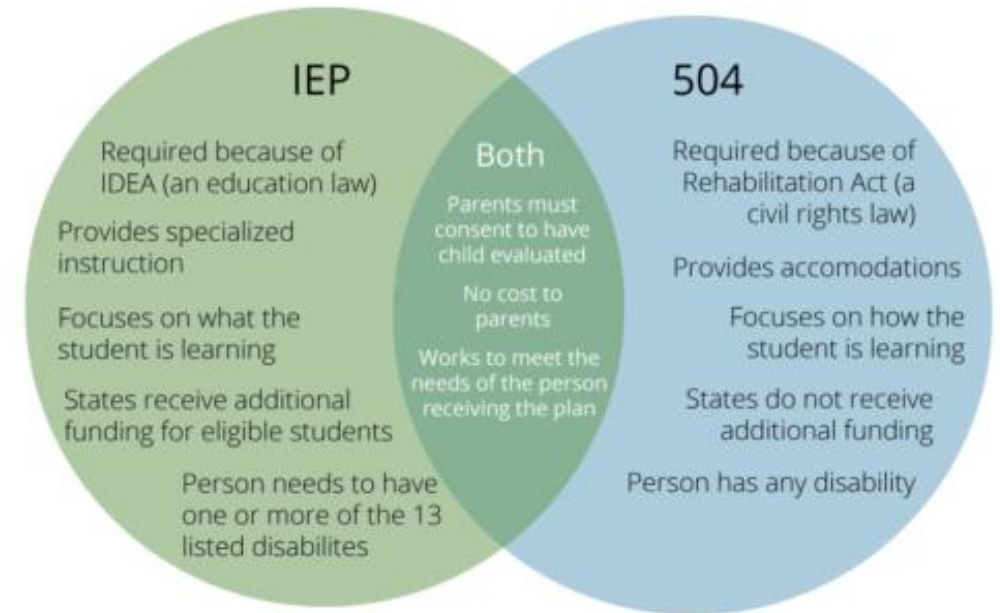
504 plan: Is a blueprint for how the school will accommodate a student with a disability and remove barriers to learning. The goal is to give the student equal access to school.



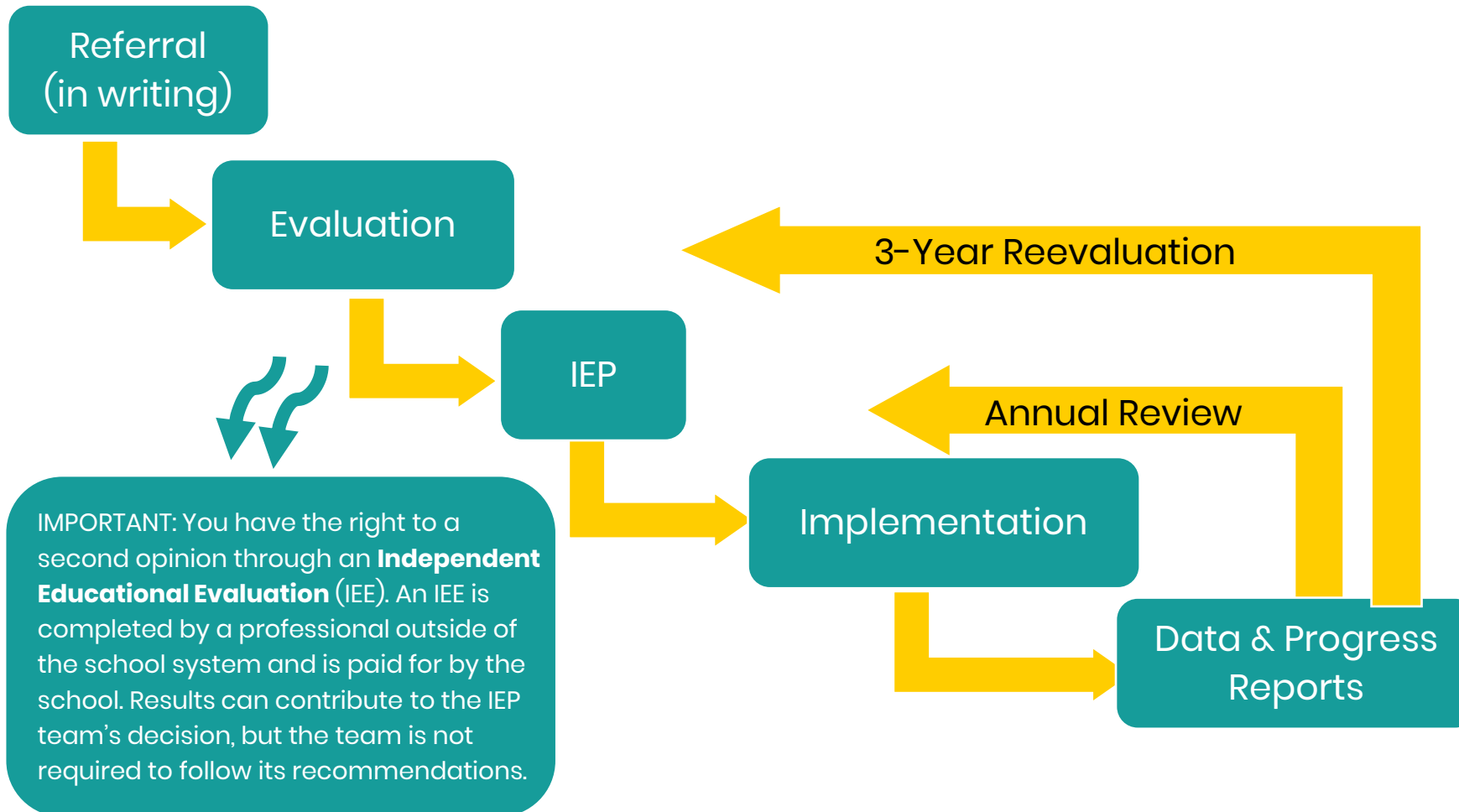
Accommodations appear on a 504 plan or an IEP and change **HOW** the student learns or shares their knowledge. (IEP and 504 plan)

WARNING: *Modifications* may take a student off the standard graduation track. It is important to discuss with the IEP team how making modifications can change what your child learns and the type of diploma your student receives.

IEP vs. 504 Plan



Tip #4. Understand evaluations and the IEP process.



Evaluations

- Usually done by the school psychologist with input from others, including parents, teachers (general and special education) and OT, PT, SLP therapists
- An important tool for the IEP team to understand the student, their strengths, challenges, and growth
- Must show “adverse educational impact” to be eligible for special education services
- Determine “eligibility” category and needs, which inform services
- May be done a maximum of once per year and a minimum of once every three years. Parents can request a re-evaluation at any time if they are seeking new and updated information about their student.

Tip #5. Learn to speak the language of data

- Assessment data should be used to assist the IEP team in problem solving, goal setting, and creating specially designed instruction (SDI).
- Any changes in the IEP should be informed by data.
- Parents should expect to receive **quarterly progress reports** that provide data and report progress made on all goals included in the IEP.
- All goals included in the IEP should be SMART goals, so that progress can be easily and accurately measured and tracked. SMART goals are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound.
- Data on goals should be collected frequently and be available to parents upon request. The IEP can include how often data is collected, if needed.



Present Levels of Performance

All IEPs and IEP meetings should begin by examining your student's present levels of performance. It is based on all the information and assessment data previously collected via the evaluation process. It should include:

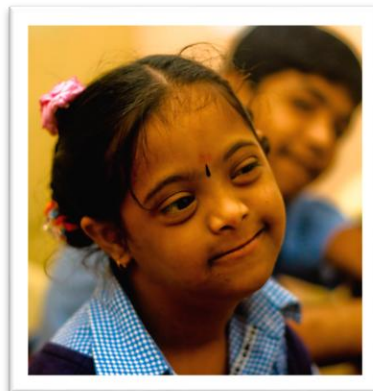
- The student's strengths and weaknesses
- What helps the student learn
- What limits or interferes with the student's learning
- Objective data from current evaluations of the child
- How the child's disability affects his or her ability to be involved and progress in the general curriculum

Knowing a student's PLP is *critical* to creating relevant goals and effective accommodations.

Tip #6. Know how and when to discuss placement

Inclusive education is a legally supported, evidence-based best practice that shows improved outcomes for ALL students.

- IDEA requires school districts to offer a range of educational placements and services, from least restricted environment to separate facilities.
- Removal from general education should occur only when a student – even with the use of supplementary aides and services – is unable to access a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).
- Students with disabilities should learn alongside nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate and be removed only when their IEP requires another arrangement.
- Students have a right to attend the school they would attend if they were nondisabled, and in the case of the IEP requiring a different placement, then as close to their home as possible.
- Educational needs drive IEP goals and IEP goals drive placement.



Five ways NOT to determine placement:

1. Prior to the IEP team agreeing on an appropriate IEP.
2. By diagnosis, labels or IEP category.
3. By academic performance, needed modifications to the curriculum, “severity” of disability, or level of support needed.
4. Lack of resources, administrative ease or difficulty in scheduling.
5. “We’ve always done it this way.”

[Extended Myths & Facts About Inclusionary Practices in Washington](#)

EXTRA: Comprehensive inclusive education

- Every student is a general education student.
- The IEP is not the student's entire educational program or curriculum. For a student eligible for special education services, their education program has three parts:
 - **The general education curriculum**
 - **The school's routines and activities**
 - **The IEP**
- Students learn and thrive when they are valued, visible members of their classroom and school communities and activities.

- [TIES resources](#)
- [OSPI guide for IEP development](#)

Step 1: Collaborative Conversations

Collaborate with the family and school team for a solid foundation to start the school year.

Step 2: Creating an Inclusive IEP

Develop an IEP that honors student and family voice and intentionally aligns supports to the general education settings, curriculum, routines, activities, and social opportunities that are available for all students in the school.

Step 3: Education Day-at-a-Glance

Efficiently implement the IEP by linking goals and supports with the student's daily schedule.

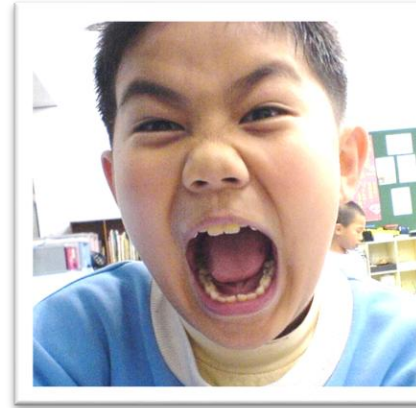
Step 4: Ongoing Education and Support

Continually collaborate to implement the IEP and ensure all students are learning.

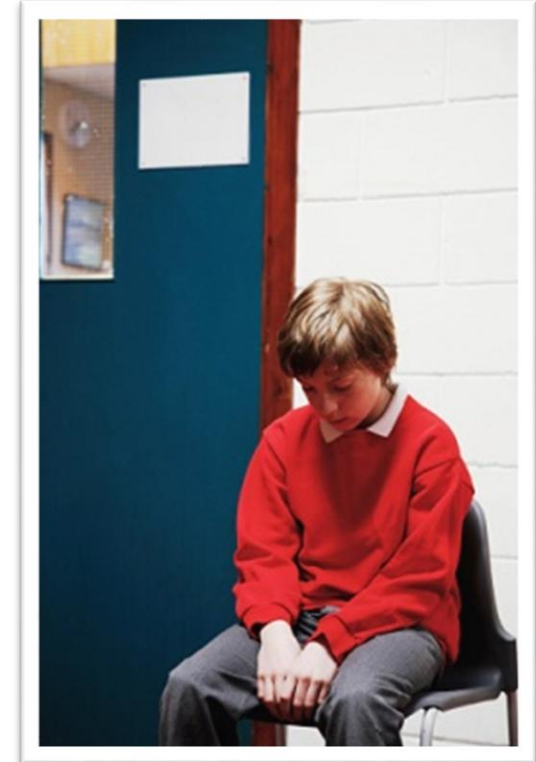


Tip #7. Be a behavior detective

- **Behavior is communication.** When behavior interferes with learning, the IEP team should consider what is causing the behavior and options for solutions. You might consider a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to learn more about what is interfering with your student's learning, and options to resolve problems.
- Once an FBA has been completed, a **Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)** or **Positive Behavior Support Plan (BPSP)** may be created, and behavior goals may be added to the IEP. The BIP/BPSP should describe strategies to resolve undesirable behavior.
- Students with disabilities are not allowed to be suspended because of behavior that is a result of their disability. Closely track how often your child is being sent home early or suspended and contact the IEP team with any concerns.



Remember, schools are required to teach our children, regardless of challenging behaviors, and to keep all children safe while doing so. Being sent home or forced to learn in isolation due to challenging behaviors is not acceptable. If this happens, an IEP meeting and a revision/creation of a behavior plan may be in order.



EXTRA: Guidance for behavior supports & crisis prevention

When behavior goes unresolved, school exclusion and incidents of restraint and isolation can occur. These practices have harmful, long-term effects on student well-being,

To support students and staff and prevent situations from escalating, the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction developed a technical assistance manual.

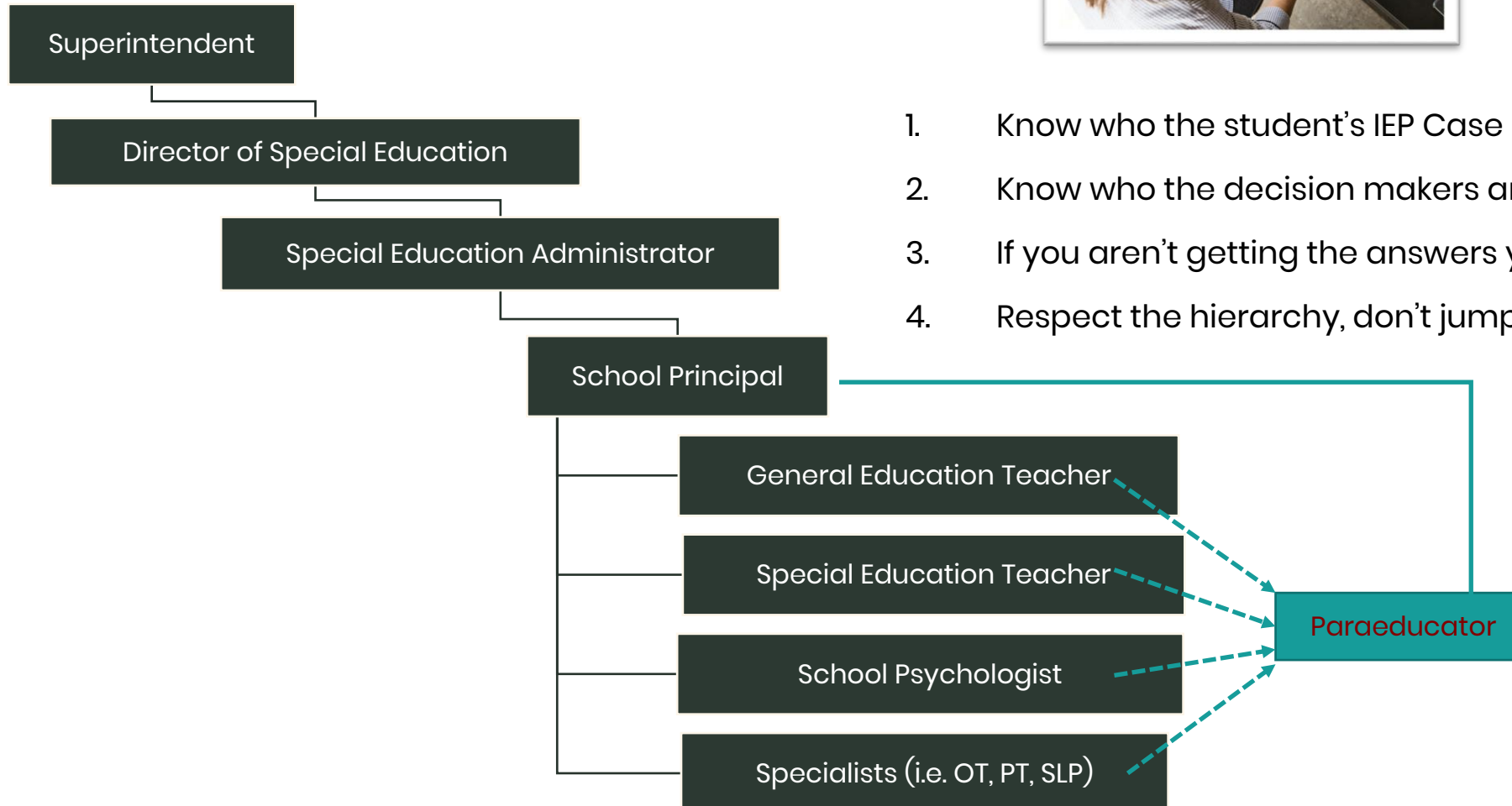
- [*Positive Behavior Supports for Resilient & Inclusive Schools: Guidance for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline, Restraint, and Isolation through Student-Centered Practices*](#) offers actionable strategies, tools, and real-world examples to help educators support students in proactive ways.

OSPI also arranged free online training in Dr. Ross Greene's **Collaborative and Proactive Solutions**. This approach works with the child to identify and resolve problems.

- [Collaborative & Proactive Solutions Training: Moving from Power to Problem Solving with Dr. Ross Greene](#)
- [Collaborative & Proactive Solutions: True Crisis Prevention with Dr. Ross Greene](#)

You can learn more about Collaborative and Proactive Solutions and find family-friendly resources at [Lives in the Balance.](#)

Tip #8. Follow the Hierarchy



1. Know who the student's IEP Case Manager is.
2. Know who the decision makers are
3. If you aren't getting the answers you need, work up the "ladder"
4. Respect the hierarchy, don't jump ahead.

Tip #9. Know options for dispute resolution

- **Request Facilitation:** Facilitation is a voluntary process for parents and districts to meet to discuss their concerns with the help of a trained, neutral facilitator. There is no cost for the facilitation services.
- **Request Mediation:** Mediation is a voluntary process for parents and districts to meet to discuss their concerns with the help of a trained, neutral mediator (Sound Options). There is no cost to the parties. Neither party is required to participate in mediation.
- **File a Community Complaint:** Any citizen can file a complaint if they believe a special education rule or law has been violated – for instance if LRE is not followed, or a service on the IEP not provided. OSPI can investigate allegations that occurred within the past year.
- **Request a Due Process Hearing:** You may wish to pursue this if the school is refusing to provide a service that you believe your student needs. In a hearing, parents and districts appear before an independent administrative law judge. The parties present information and documents about the issues so the judge can reach a decision.
- **File an Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Complaint:** You can file a complaint if you believe your child was discriminated against, for instance if there are repeated patterns of exclusion for reasons related to disability (exclusion from field trips, disciplinary exclusion due to disability, repeated late bus arrival/pickup, exclusion from extracurricular activities and clubs, etc).



Communication Requirements

The school has 25 school days to decide whether to evaluate after a written request or referral is made.

They have 35 school days to complete the evaluation after parents provide written consent.

They have 30 school days after eligibility is determined for an IEP meeting to be held.

Parents must be provided a copy of the evaluation report 5 school days before the determination meeting.

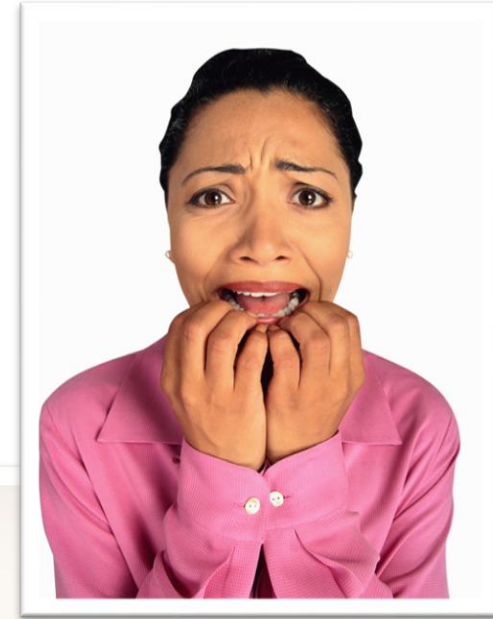
Notice of Refusal – explains what the district believes the parent is asking for and why the district is refusing to provide it

Prior Written Notice – Ensures that any service being proposed for reduction or elimination, or any change to the IEP program, occurs with sufficient parent notification so that parents can challenge the decision and/or exercise “stay put,” which ensures the student can receive existing services while the dispute is being worked out.

Tip #10. Be thoughtful when working with the IEP team

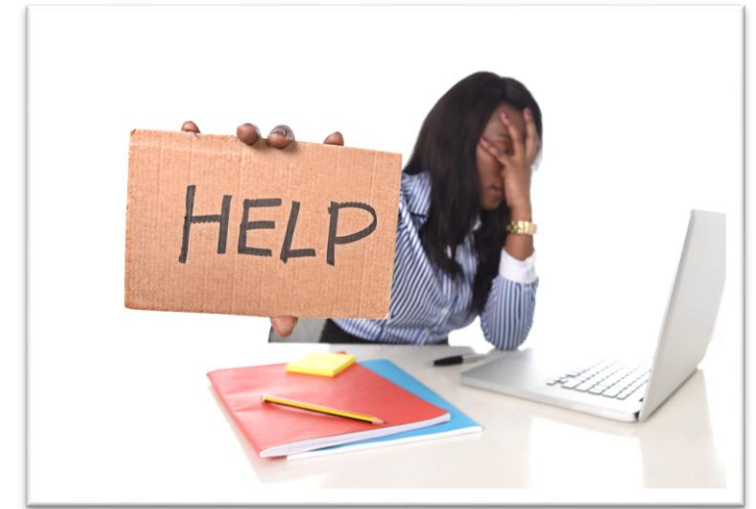
Discussion

- Balancing relationships vs. advocacy
- Communication style
- Can we be friends?
- *Should* we be friends?



Additional Resources

- Wrights Law (www.wrightslaw.com)
Extensive parent-friendly information about special education law and advocacy nationwide.
- US Department of Education IDEA website (<http://idea.ed.gov/>)
The federal government's website about IDEA. Has extensive information about each area addressed in IDEA.
- Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Special Education Parent & Community Liaison (<http://www.k12.wa.us/specialed/families/assistance.aspx>)
Available as a resource to answer questions, provide information and referral, and help parents understand the complaint process. Does not advocate on behalf on any one party.
- Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) (www.oeo.wa.gov)
OEO can serve as a neutral third party between families in public schools and may attend IEP meetings on occasion.
- The Arc of King County IEP Parent Partner Program (www.arcofkingcounty.org)
We provide phone consultation, and we can occasionally connect trained and experienced IEP Parent Partners with parents and guardians needing support to navigate the special education system



Do you have specific questions?

Contact The Arc of King County's Information & Family Support team

- Ask@arcofkingcounty.org
- Preguntas@arcofkingcounty.org (Spanish)
- [206-829-7053](tel:206-829-7053)

For languages other than Spanish, we use a phone interpretation service

The Arc US also partnered with Understood.org to develop a free online tool that delivers expert-vetted answers to special education questions.

[The Arc AI Advisory](#)