

# Special Education

Special education is a federal program that assists local schools in addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Each child receives support and it varies from student to student depending on their unique needs. The main goal is to make sure students with disabilities have the tools and instruction they need to be successful in school.

## What is special education?

Special education focuses on helping children with disabilities learn. Federal law requires that students who receive special education be taught alongside their non-disabled peers as much as possible. By law, schools are required to give special education in the [least restrictive environment](#) (LRE). This means the starting point for discussion should be the supports your child needs to succeed in a general education classroom.

Schools have a special term for deciding to place a child in one classroom rather than another. Schools refer to this as "placement". General education classrooms are the most common placement for kids with learning disabilities.

For example, a student with dyslexia may spend most of the day in a general education classroom. They may spend just an hour or two in a resource room working with a specialist on reading and other skills. Other students with dyslexia might need more support than that. And others might need to attend a different school that specializes in teaching kids with learning disabilities.

There is no "one size fits all" approach to special education and each program should be tailored to meet each student's needs. If your child qualifies for special education, they will receive individualized teaching and other key resources at no cost to you.

## Who qualifies for special education?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that regulates special education. The law requires public schools to give special education services

to children ages 3 to 21 who meet qualifying criteria.

To qualify for special education services, a student must:

1. Have a documented disability that is covered by IDEA, *and*
2. Need special education to access the general education curriculum.

“Access” is an important term in education. Making the curriculum accessible to students with disabilities is a lot like making buildings accessible to people in wheelchairs. If there’s a barrier to your child’s learning, such as difficulty reading, the school needs to come up with the comparable to a wheelchair ramp to help your child access the reading material.

School districts have a process in place to determine which students are eligible for special education. This process involves a comprehensive evaluation that looks at the way your child thinks. It also looks at other aspects of her development. You or your child’s school can ask for an evaluation. If the district agrees to test your child, the testing will be conducted at no cost to you.

## **What disabilities are covered by special education?**

IDEA covers 13 types of disabilities. They are:

1. Specific learning disability (SLD) – The umbrella term “SLD” covers a specific group of learning issues. The conditions in this group affect a child’s ability to read, write, listen, speak, reason or do math. Here are some of the issues that could fall in this group:

- [Dyslexia](#)
- [Dysgraphia](#)
- [Dyscalculia](#)
- [Auditory processing disorder](#)
- [Nonverbal learning disability](#)

2. Other health impairment – The umbrella term “other health impairment” covers conditions that limit a child’s strength, energy or alertness. One example is an attention issue like [ADHD](#).

3. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – [ASD](#) is a developmental disability. It covers a wide range of symptoms and skills, but mainly affects a child’s social and communication skills. It can also impact behavior.
4. Emotional disturbance – Children covered under the term “emotional disturbance” can have some mental disorders. They may include [anxiety](#) disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and [depression](#). (Some of these issues may also be covered under “other health impairment.”)
5. Speech or language impairment – The umbrella term “[speech or language impairment](#)” covers some communication problems. Those include stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment or voice impairment.
6. Visual impairment, including blindness – A child who has vision problems is considered to have a visual impairment. This condition includes both partial sight and blindness. If eyewear can correct a vision problem, then it doesn’t qualify.
7. Deafness – Children with a diagnosis of deafness have a severe hearing impairment. They aren’t able to process language through hearing.
8. Hearing impairment – The term “hearing impairment” refers to a hearing loss not covered by the definition of deafness. This loss can change or fluctuate over time. Remember that being hard of hearing is [different](#) than having auditory processing disorder.
9. Deaf-blindness – Children with a diagnosis of deaf-blindness have both hearing and visual impairments. Their communication and other needs are so great that programs for the deaf or blind can’t meet them.
10. Orthopedic impairment – Any impairment to a child’s body, no matter what the cause, is considered an orthopedic impairment.
11. Intellectual disability – Children with this disability have below-average intellectual ability. They may also have poor communication, self-care and social skills. Down syndrome is one example of an intellectual disability.
12. Traumatic brain injury – This is a brain injury is caused by an accident or some kind of physical force.
13. Multiple disabilities – A child with many disabilities has more than one condition covered by IDEA. Having many issues creates educational needs that can’t be met in a program for any one condition.

# What strategies help special education students in the general education classroom?

Schools use many strategies to help students receiving special education services succeed in general education settings. These strategies include:

- [Assistive technology](#) such as providing a laptop to help a student with a writing disability take notes in class
- [Accommodations](#) such as seating the student near the teacher (and far from distractions) or allowing him to give oral reports instead of writing essays
- [Modifications](#) such as reducing the amount of homework a student is assigned
- [Paraprofessionals](#) who serve as teachers' aides helping students with various tasks such as taking notes and highlighting important information

Other types of classrooms or placements should be considered only if you and the school think your child will not be able to experience success in the general education classroom. There are some important things to consider before [changing your child's placement](#). For example, it's important to know that [schools can't use budget issues](#) as a reason to refuse to provide accommodations and services.

## What are accommodations?

Accommodations are a key part of special education. Much like a wheelchair ramp allows more people to access a building, classroom accommodations allow more students to access the general curriculum. For example, if a child has dyslexia, [text-to-speech software](#) that reads aloud the words on a computer screen can help him access material that is at a higher level than he could read on his own. Some students receive [accommodations on standardized tests](#) as well classroom tests. Getting extra time to complete tests is a common accommodation.

## What are modifications?

When people talk about accommodations, they often talk about [modifications](#) as well. It's important to understand the difference between [accommodations and modifications](#). Accommodations refer to *how* a student learns. Modifications refer to *how much* a student is expected to do or learn. For example, some students may be

given shorter writing assignments or fewer math problems. Other students may be provided books with a lower reading level than the ones that are assigned to their non-disabled peers. It's common for a student to receive both modifications and accommodations. Here are examples of [common accommodations and modifications](#).

## What do “related services” include?

Federal law allows schools to offer certain kinds of services that aren't strictly educational but are needed so that students can gain from special education. These are called related services.

Examples of related services include:

- [Mental health counseling](#) for children and parents
- **Social work** to give support to children and families and help in developing [positive behavioral interventions](#)
- [Speech-language therapy](#) to improve communication skills that affect learning
- **Transportation** to and from school and, in some cases, to and from extracurricular activities

Another term you may hear is “supplementary aids and services.” These can include adapted equipment, such as a special cushion that can help kids with attention or [sensory processing issues](#) stay seated and focused for longer periods of time. Other examples of supplementary support include assistive technology and training for staff, students and parents.

## What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

The IEP is often described as the cornerstone of special education. That's because this [legally binding document](#) details a student's annual learning goals as well as the special services and supports the school will offer to help them meet those goals.

Before your child can receive special education services, you and the school must complete several steps. Here's how the process generally works:

**1. Referral for evaluation:** When your child is struggling and a learning or attention issue is suspected, you or the school can [ask for an evaluation](#). Your ask may be accepted or [denied](#). Either way, the school must explain its decision to you. The school can't test your child unless you give written permission.

**2. Evaluation:** If the school agrees to test your child, the school psychologist and other specialists will give your child various tests. They also may watch the child in the classroom. The evaluation will find whether your child has one of the 13 disabilities covered by the IDEA. The evaluation will also give information about their educational needs.

**3. Determination of eligibility:** After the evaluation, a special team from the school meets with you to discuss whether your child has a disability and if it affects her ability to learn. (If your child doesn't meet the requirements for an IEP, they may qualify for a [504 plan](#), which can offer many of the same accommodations and services.)

**4. Developing the IEP:** If your child is eligible for special education, their [IEP team](#) creates a plan to meet their needs. You are an equal member of this team and [play a very important role](#). You know and understand your child better than anyone else on the team. Your insights can help make sure that your child receives the services and supports they need to succeed in school.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For more information on Special Education in South Dakota, please visit: <https://www.sdparent.org/guides-briefs/south-dakota-parents-guide-to-special-education> and review the "What Parents Should Know...About Special Education in South Dakota" guidebook

General information on Special Education and IDEA can be found at:

<https://www.understood.org/>

### **Need a Navigator?**

Contact [South Dakota Parent Connection](#)

### **Need an Advocate or Attorney?**

Contact [Disability Rights South Dakota](#)

### **Is Your Child Turning 18?**

Check out these INFOGRAPHICS to help you understand Transfer of Rights

## Parents:



## Student:



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