

The Difference Between IEPs and Service Plans

By Amanda Morin

Have you enrolled your child with learning and attention issues in a private school? Are you concerned about getting him services and supports? If so, it's important to know that special education is offered differently depending on the type of school.

If you choose private school, your child won't have an [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)](#), which is offered in public schools for kids in [special education](#).

Private schools can offer special education, but they aren't required to. If they choose to provide it, some private schools may offer an Instructional Services Plan or an Individual Services Plan, both known as ISPs. That happens when the private school works to provide specialized services within their own system.

But it's important to know that if your child chooses a private school, he most likely will get what's called a *service plan* through your local education agency (LEA)—not through the private school itself.

The LEA manages services and funding for schools in the local area it covers. ("Local" can mean different things in different areas. It could be state, regional or individual school districts.)

[The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) requires that LEAs set aside funding for students with disabilities whose parents choose to send them to private school.

Because this money is limited, your child will receive "equitable services." These services can be similar to the ones in an IEP. But these services may be fewer than if he went to public school. That's just one way service plans are different from IEPs. [Learn more.](#)

| | IEP | Service Plan |
|-------------------|--|--|
| What it is | A blueprint for a student's special education experience in a public school. The plan must ensure that the child receives a free appropriate public education, or FAPE. | A plan paid for by the local school district for students with disabilities who attend private schools. A service plan does not have to ensure a child is provided with FAPE. |

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|---------------------------------|---|--|
| What it does | <p>An IEP spells out the services, supports and specialized instruction a child with a disability will receive in school.</p> <p>These services are provided at no cost to parents.</p> | <p>A service plan spells out the special education and related services the LEA will <i>make available</i> to a child.</p> <p>These services are provided at no cost to parents. But the student may not be able to receive these services at the private school. Instead, the LEA can require him to go to a public school for services like speech therapy sessions.</p> |
| What law applies | <p>IDEA is the federal special education law for children with disabilities that all public schools must follow.</p> | <p>§34 CFR 300.130 through §300.144 of IDEA is a specific section that describes how services are provided to kids in private school.</p> |
| How IDEA funding applies | <p>IDEA says that public school students with disabilities must receive individualized services to provide FAPE.</p> <p>It is not budget-dependent. That means schools should not limit services because of money.</p> | <p>Students don't have an individual right to get the same special education and related services as they would in public school.</p> <p>Instead, they're entitled to "equitable services." This is based on the funding available for private schools.</p> |
| Who's eligible | <p>To qualify for an IEP, a child must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have one of the 13 disabilities covered under IDEA • Need special education for his disability in order to successfully benefit from and access a general education curriculum | <p>To qualify for a service plan, a child must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be placed in a private school by his parents, not as an out-of-district placement • Have one of the 13 disabilities covered under IDEA • Need special education in order to successfully benefit from and access a general education curriculum |

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| Who creates the program/plan | <p>An IEP must be created by a team that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A parent or legal guardian • A general education teacher • A special education teacher • A professional who can interpret evaluation results • A school administrator who knows about general and special education and who oversees special education services at the school | <p>A service plan must be created by the same people who make up an IEP team, as well as a representative of the private school.</p> |
| Parent consent | <p>Parents must provide written consent for the school to evaluate a child.</p> <p>They also have to provide written consent before the school can provide the services in an IEP.</p> | <p>A parent must provide written consent for their child to be evaluated. And the LEA will conduct the evaluation.</p> <p>A parent might request that the LEA in which the private school is located evaluate a child instead of the LEA in his local district. But the LEA will make the final decision.</p> |
| Your rights and your child's rights | <p>IDEA requires public schools to provide services to students in the least restrictive environment (LRE).</p> <p>Parents have a say in the educational decisions for their kids. Under IDEA, there are specific rights and protections for parents, as well as for kids with learning and attention issues. These are called procedural safeguards.</p> | <p>Parents have a say in the educational decisions for their kids.</p> <p>LEAs must evaluate students in private schools who may need special education. This is known as Child Find. If a parent thinks the LEA has failed to identify or evaluate their child, they can follow due process procedures.</p> <p>Parents don't have due process rights if they have concerns a school isn't providing a FAPE.</p> |
| How often it's reviewed and revised | <p>An IEP must be reviewed at least once a year.</p> <p>The student must also be re-evaluated every three years to see if services are still needed.</p> | <p>IDEA says a service plan must be reviewed "to the extent appropriate" as often as an IEP.</p> <p>It doesn't specify how often a service plan must be updated.</p> |

Read one mom’s story about getting service plans in a parochial school. Explore a list of things to look for in a private school. Learn about private schools specifically for kids with learning and attention issues. And if you’re considering using a voucher to move your child to private school, here’s what you need to know.

About the Author



Amanda Morin worked as a classroom teacher and as an early intervention specialist for 10 years. She is the author of *The Everything Parent’s Guide to Special Education*. Two of her children have learning issues.

Reviewed by



Melody Musgrove, Ed.D., served as director of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education.

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32 Laight Street, 1st Floor
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