

Navigating the Special Education System

A Challenging Journey

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What is Special Education?

According to the Ministry of Education, **special education programs and services** consist primarily of instruction and assessments that are different from those provided to the general student population.

These may take the form of **accommodations** (such as specific teaching strategies, preferential seating, and assistive technology) and/or **an educational program that is modified** from the age-appropriate grade level expectations in a particular course or subject.



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Terms you should know:

- Identification, Placement & Review Committee (IPRC)
- Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- Accommodations, Modifications and Alternative Skill Areas



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The **Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)** process is based on requirements set out in Ontario **Regulation 181/98** of the Education Act.

An IPRC is the only process by which a pupil can be identified as "**exceptional**" and therefore becomes entitled to "special education programs" and "special education services".

Your child may still be able to receive remedial help through the school and have an IEP, but the IPRC is the official method of '**legally entitling**' students to special education. It is also the only process that has a **legal appeal mechanism**.



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A parent can initiate the IPRC process by writing a letter to the principal requesting an IPRC.

A parent is entitled to be present and participate in all IPRC discussions about a child and should make every effort to attend IPRC meetings.

A parent has the right to have a representative present at an IPRC meeting to speak on the parent's behalf or be present to support the parent.

The Chair of an IPRC must consider any information submitted to it by the parent (doctor's diagnosis, assessments conducted by other professionals).



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After making its decision, the Chair of the IPRC must send a written **statement of decision** to a parent, which must include:

Whether the Committee has identified the pupil as **exceptional**;
if so:

- the Committee's description of the pupil's **strengths and needs**
- the **categories and definitions** of exceptionalities identified
- the Committee's **placement decision**
- the Committee's **recommendations**, regarding special education programs and services.



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If you disagree with the IPRC's decision, you have 15 (school) days to request a second meeting of the IPRC. If after your second meeting you are still dissatisfied, you have 15 days from the second decision to file an appeal.

If you disagree with the original decision but do not request a second meeting or file an appeal, the decision of the IPRC will automatically be implemented after 30 days.

A review IPRC meeting will be held each year, during which your child's progress should be reviewed. This review may be waived only with your written permission. You may also request a review IPRC any time after your child has been in a special education program for 3 months.



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What is an **Individual Education Plan**?

An **Individual Education Plan**, or **IEP**, is a written plan that helps the teacher to:

- understand your child and what he or she needs to be successful at school
- plan how to help by setting goals for your child's learning outline the steps to get to those goals.

The school **must** create an IEP if your child has been identified through an IPRC.

The school **may** create an IEP if your child has not been formally identified.



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The **IEP** is divided into the following sections:

1. Reason for Developing the IEP
2. Student Profile
3. Relevant Assessment Data
4. Student's Areas of Strengths and Needs
5. Subjects, Courses/Codes, or Alternative Skill Areas to which the IEP applies
6. Accommodations for Learning
7. Provincial Assessments (EQAO)
8. Special Education Program goals and expectations
9. Human Resources – people working with the student
10. IEP Development Team
11. Transition Plan for 14+ students
12. Parent/student Consultation



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Accommodations are ways of teaching and testing that don't change *what* your child learns, just the *way* they learn and the way they *show* what they have learned.

Accommodations do *not* change the skills that your child is learning or will be tested on.

For example, a student may study from books that are on audiotape or electronic format, but they are studying the same books.



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Instructional Accommodations are changes in teaching methods (For example, using larger letters or numbers for students who can't see well, or providing lesson outlines in advance).

Environmental Accommodations are changes to the classroom and/or school. (For example, seating a child closer to the board or activity if the child has problems seeing or hearing or is easily distracted)

Assessment Accommodations are made so that your child can show what he or she has learned. (For example, your child says the answer instead of writing it down, or uses **assistive technology**).



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Assistive technology includes any technology tools that help a student to learn, or to demonstrate what they have learned; e.g.:

- students with hearing loss may need equipment such as personal hearing aids, cochlear implants, and/or FM and sound field equipment
- students with physical disabilities may need mobility aids such as walkers and/or adaptive computer equipment
- students with reading and writing difficulties may need laptops or portable keyboards with specialized software such as text-to-speech or voice dictation.



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Modifications are the changes made to the subject or course to meet the needs of the student.

Modifications may involve:

- using different curriculum content (from a different grade level)
- changing the expected amount of material to be learned
- changing the level of thinking skills required.
- raising grade level expectations and requiring more complex expectations, especially for those students identified as Gifted.



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Modifications (cont'd)

In the **elementary grades**, for the core subjects such as Math and Language, the expectations may be taken from a different grade level. For content subjects, such as Social Studies or History, the **modifications** may include changes to the number and/or complexity of learning expectations in the regular grade level curriculum.

In **high school**, the school principal decides how much modification can be allowed for high school courses for them still to be counted as a credit. Some students might be successful in credit courses with accommodations such as assistive technology, rather than modifying the content of the course.



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Alternative Skill Areas are for students who need to develop knowledge or skills that are not usually taught in school and are *not in the provincial curriculum for any grade*. For example:

- learning Braille, sign language or picture symbols as an alternative communication system
- learning anger management, behaviour control skills or social skills
- learning listening skills or organizational skills



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These are **alternative skill areas** *if someone is specifically teaching them to the student, and assessing their progress based on the expectations.*

Skills that are taught to the whole class or generally encouraged in the classroom are *not* **alternative skill areas**.

In secondary school, courses that do not count as credits can be listed as **alternative skill areas** (usually coded as “K” courses).



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The log of **parent/student consultation** records your involvement in the IEP process, and your child's involvement if they are old enough to participate, and should include:

- the **date** when the school talked with you or your child (if over 16 years old) by phone, at an IEP meeting, or during a teacher conference
- a **description of consultation** to describe the items discussed and the actions that are to be taken
- parent/student feedback/outcome of consultation**

The school must write down that:

- you were consulted on the development of the IEP, **or**
- you were asked to take part in the IEP development and said no.



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Making the IEP work

When the teachers really understand your child's needs, the IEP is much more likely to be implemented.

For example, it is better to help the teacher understand why your child needs to have class notes (instead of copying off the board) than simply pointing out that the teacher is not complying with (obeying) the IEP.

While you do need to be firm, a collaborative (sharing) approach, acknowledging that the teacher has a lot to do, usually works best.



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Sometimes parents and teachers cannot agree on how the IEP should be implemented (for example, when and where accommodations such as assistive technology can be used).

When problems arise that cannot be solved with the teacher alone, ask for a meeting with the teacher, the principal, and the special education resource teacher.

A problem-solving meeting can be very useful to try and resolve issues. If you feel uncomfortable, ask someone to go with you, even to take notes (but let the school principal know that you will be bringing someone with you for support).



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After a meeting with school staff, you can write a note to the teacher and other staff members to thank them for their time and attention to your child's needs, and:

- summarize your understanding of the discussion and any action plans
- ask them to clarify anything that you understood differently
- ask for a time for a follow-up meeting on progress of the action plans

If the situation cannot be resolved at the school level, you may want to call an area superintendent or a special education coordinator at your school board office. Ask if your board has a **Communication Protocol** of who to contact first, second, third, etc. when you have concerns.



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Sometimes a **superintendent or special education coordinator** can facilitate a problem-solving meeting at the school to resolve issues.

School boards are starting to develop **informal and more formal dispute resolution processes**. Ask if your board has such a process.

Sometimes trustees can be helpful in resolving issues.

Sometimes it helps to talk to an education officer at your **Regional Office** of the Ontario Ministry of Education to get their ideas and point of view.



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Sometimes it can help to keep reminding everyone, including yourself, that you all have a common goal — meeting the special education needs of your child.



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Resources

IEP 101 for Parents and Students (free online workshop):
www.idao.ca/workshops-courses/iep-101-online-workshop-for-parents-and-students/

Ministry of Education Special Education section:
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/speced.html

Shared Solutions: A Guide to Preventing and Resolving Conflicts: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/shared.html



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