

GEORGIA SPECIAL EDUCATION FAMILY GUIDE

2025-2026 EDITION

Welcome from GeorgiaCAN

At GeorgiaCAN, we believe every family deserves clear, accessible information to make the best choices for their child's education. Across the state, we hear from families who are navigating the complex world of special education, often for the first time, and are searching for answers, support, and community.

That's why we created this Special Education Guide: to provide a parent-friendly, Georgia-specific resource to help you better understand your rights, your options, and how to advocate for your child.

Whether you're just beginning the IEP process or have been on this journey for years, we hope this guide empowers you with the tools and language to partner effectively with your school and ensure your child receives the education they deserve.

This guide reflects our mission: to listen to families, advocate for better opportunities, and support systems that put students first, especially those with diverse learning needs.

You are not alone, and we're honored to be on this journey with you.

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What is a disability under special education?

This guide is not legal advice—it is intended to support families as they navigate a world full of new processes, steps, and language. Our goal is to help you feel more confident and informed as you advocate for your child.

A **disability**, in the context of special education, refers to a condition that affects a student's ability to learn, communicate, move, behave, or participate in school activities in the same way as their peers. Under the federal **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, students may qualify for special education services if they meet the criteria for one or more of the **12 disability categories**:

1. **Autism Spectrum Disorder**
2. **Deafblind.**
3. **Deaf/Hard of Hearing**
4. **Emotional and Behavioral Disorder**
5. **Intellectual Disability** (mild, moderate, severe, profound)
6. **Orthopedic Impairment**
7. **Other Health Impairment**
8. **Significant Developmental Delay**
9. **Specific Learning Disability**
10. **Speech-Language Impairment**
11. **Traumatic Brain Injury**
12. **Visual Impairment**

To qualify for special education, the disability must **negatively impact the child's educational performance** and require **specially designed instruction or related services**. This is determined through a **formal evaluation process** involving a team of professionals and the child's parent(s).

In this guide, we walk you through each step of that journey so you can feel informed and empowered. And don't miss the **glossary of special education terms at the back**—special education comes with a lot of acronyms and unfamiliar language, so we've included a helpful reference to give you the tools to better understand and advocate for your child every step of the way.

Getting Started with Special Education

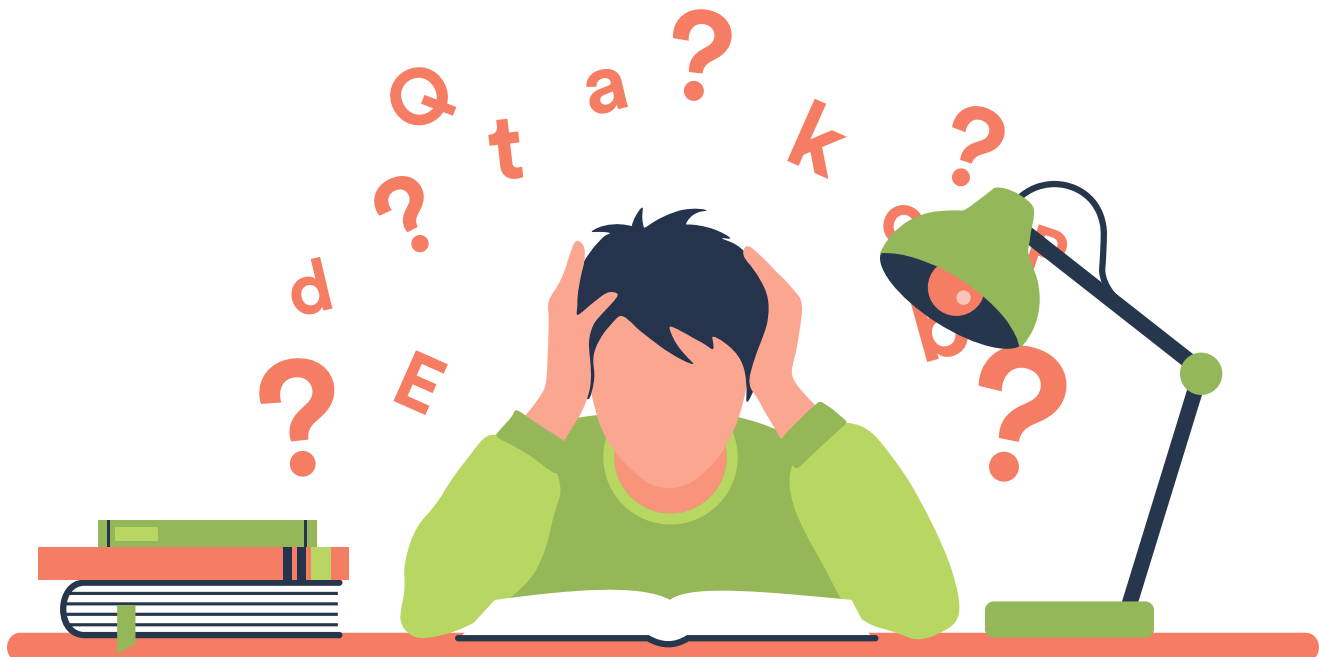
Navigating special education can feel overwhelming at first, but you're not alone. Understanding the basic steps in the process can help you feel more confident and prepared as you support your child.

Whether you're just beginning to ask questions about your child's development or already exploring formal support, this section walks you through what to expect—from the very first request for help to the moment your child begins receiving services.

Here's a simple overview of the process:



This guide will walk you through each of these steps in more detail—so you can be informed, empowered, and ready to advocate every step of the way.



1 Requesting an Evaluation

If you suspect your child may have a disability that's affecting their learning, you have the right to request a free evaluation from the school.

HOW TO REQUEST AN EVALUATION: AGES 0-3

Worried your baby or toddler isn't meeting milestones?

Help is available before preschool through **Early Intervention**, a program under **IDEA Part C**.

Who Qualifies?

Children **birth to age 3** with a **developmental delay**, or diagnosed condition (such as Down syndrome, hearing loss, or cerebral palsy).

What Do Supports Look Like?

Services are based on your child's individual needs and may include:

- Speech, physical, or occupational therapy
- Developmental and play-based therapy
- Vision or hearing services
- Family support and coaching
- Service coordination

Did you know? These supports are often provided in **your home or childcare setting** to keep things familiar and accessible.

What Will You Receive?

An **IFSP**, Individualized Family Service Plan, that outlines your child's goals and the services to help reach them.

Need more Information?

Babies Can't Wait is Georgia's Early Intervention program.

Website: dph.georgia.gov/Babies-Cant-Wait

Phone: 1-800-229-2038






No doctor referral is needed. Parents can call directly to request a free evaluation.



“My son transitioned into the early intervention program from the babies can't wait program at age 3. He received services for his speech delay. Through the program he was able to meet with a speech therapists weekly. Whether she came to his daycare or I took him to the local elementary school. Whatever worked best for the speech therapists and I we made a plan to make it happen. Once he turned 5 and entered into kindergarten he continued with speech services based on his IEP.”

– Shakia Mccrary

HOW TO REQUEST AN EVALUATION: AGES 3-12

-  Write a letter addressed to the school's principal or student support coordinator expressing concerns about your child's progress.
-  Keep it on file and request a meeting within 15 days.
-  Ask for a screening or formal evaluation based on behaviors you've noticed (e.g., difficulty reading instructions, struggles with math, frequent frustration, or behavior changes).
-  Attach any documentation you've gathered (work samples, clinician letters).
-  Submit via email or certified mail, and follow up until you get a written response.



Parent Pro-Tip: Keep copies of all your communication with the school and classwork samples.



“As a parent, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of early intervention for a child's development. My son began receiving support in kindergarten, and it truly made a huge difference. That early help gave him the confidence and skills he needed to succeed. Now, he has been on the AB honor roll every year since, from elementary school through middle school. Watching him grow and thrive, has shown me just how impactful that early support really is.”

– Ophelia Nnorom

Once the school receives your request, Georgia guidelines require:

- Notification to parents within a reasonable time, typically 10 calendar days.
- A consent form for full evaluation, not required for screenings only.
- Completion of assessments in all suspected areas of disability (academic, behavioral, speech, etc.).
- Conducting the evaluation and sharing results within 60 school days from consent.
- Schools to evaluate in the child's native language and use qualified professionals to ensure accurate results.

WHAT CAN I DO IF THE SCHOOL WON'T EVALUATE MY CHILD?

1. Put your evaluation request in writing

Ask for a **full special education evaluation** under **Child Find** (schools are legally required to evaluate when there's reason to suspect a disability).

Sample language:

“I am requesting a full special education evaluation for my child under Child Find. I believe my child may have a disability that is affecting their learning.”

2. The school must respond within a set time

In Georgia, the school must give you a **written decision** (called **prior written notice**) within a **reasonable time**—either to:

- Get your consent and start evaluation
- Refuse and explain why

3. If they refuse, you can challenge it

You have the right to **file a state complaint** or **request a due process hearing** to challenge their refusal to evaluate.

Get more information here: <https://gadoe.org/special-education/dispute-resolution/>

2 Evaluation

The school conducts assessments to better understand your child's strengths and needs. This includes input from specialists and from you as the parent.

BEFORE THE EVALUATION

The IEP team will meet to review what they already know about your child. This includes:

- School records and prior support your child has received
- Teacher notes on how your child is doing
- Your input about learning at home
- Health or therapy reports

You can also bring your own documents to share, such as:

- Work samples from your child
- Notes or observations from doctors/therapists
- Checklists tracking your child's development
- Any outside testing reports

DURING THE EVALUATION

Your child will be assessed by different specialists, like school psychologists, speech therapists, or occupational therapists, depending on their needs. These evaluations include **formal tests** that compare your child's skills to typical age levels, as well as **informal assessments** that look at how your child functions in everyday situations. The team may also collect progress data during this time to see how your child responds to help. Once all the assessments are finished, the school team—along with your input—will review the results to decide if your child qualifies for special education services.



Parent Pro-Tip: Be prepared to explain why you feel the current supports aren't enough. This helps the team know what to focus on during the evaluation.



3 Eligibility Meeting

A team—including you—meets to review the results and decide if your child qualifies for special education services under one of the disability categories defined by the law.

WHAT HAPPENS AT AN ELIGIBILITY MEETING?

An **eligibility meeting** is when the school team and you come together to decide if your child qualifies for special education services.

Here's what to expect:

- The team reviews the results of your child's evaluation, including tests and reports from teachers, therapists, and other specialists.
- You'll have a chance to share your observations and concerns about your child's strengths and challenges.
- The team discusses whether your child meets the criteria for one or more of the disability categories under the law.
- If your child is found eligible, the team will talk about next steps, including developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- If your child is not eligible, the team may discuss other ways to support your child, such as accommodations through a 504 plan or outside services.

"...I DON'T AGREE WITH THE SCHOOL'S DISABILITY LABEL."

What to do:

Request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at public expense in writing.

Tip:

You do not have to accept the school's classification and have a legal right to seek a second opinion.

More info:

[Understood.org](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-issues/when-you-disagree-with-the-school) – When You Disagree With the School

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN IEP AND A 504 PLAN?

Feature	IEP (Special Ed)	Section 504 Plan
Eligibility	Recognized disability under IDEA	Disability that limits major life activities
Purpose	Provides specialized instruction and related services	Ensures access and equal opportunity
Plan Length	Annual with goals	Often ongoing, reviewed as needed
Team Involved	IEP team	Regular Ed teacher, parent, 504 Coordinator
Required Services	Yes, mandated by law	Accommodations (e.g., extra time), but no specialized instruction
Source of Compliance	Federal IDEA and Georgia Rules	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

This meeting is a key part of making sure your child gets the right support for their education.



Parent Pro-Tip: You can request a copy of the evaluation report from the school psychologist.

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY CHILD DOESN'T QUALIFY FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AT THE ELIGIBILITY MEETING?

1. **Ask for a copy of the evaluation report.** Make sure you understand why your child wasn't found eligible.
2. **Request a meeting with the school team.** Even if your child doesn't have an IEP, you can ask the school for a meeting to discuss the evaluation results, your concerns, and possible next steps or supports.
3. **Consider requesting an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE).** You can ask the school to pay for a second opinion if you disagree with their evaluation.
4. **Explore other services or programs.** If your child is under age 3, see if Early Intervention (Babies Can't Wait) can help. If your child is K-12, ask about 504 accommodations.
5. **File a complaint or request mediation.** If you think the evaluation was unfair, contact the Georgia Special Education Help Desk to file a complaint or request mediation.

Georgia Special Education Help Desk:

Phone: 1-800-311-3627

Email: specialhelpdesk@gadoe.org

Website: <https://gadoe.org/special-education/>

6. **Request a due process hearing.** This is a formal legal process to challenge the school's decision if needed.

STEPS TO REQUEST AN IEE

1. **Review the school's evaluation:** Do you disagree with the results or feel something was missed?
2. **Write a simple request.**

Example:

“I am requesting an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at public expense because I disagree with the school’s evaluation.”

3. **Send it to the school:** Give it to the special ed director or your IEP contact, and keep a copy for yourself.
4. **Wait for the school’s response:** They must either approve the IEE, or file for a hearing (they rarely do).
5. **Choose a qualified evaluator:** You can use theirs or find your own (as long as they meet basic rules).
6. **Share the results at your next IEP meeting:** The team must consider the IEE when making decisions.



Parent Pro-Tip: You don’t have to explain why you disagree with the school’s evaluation—but you can if you want to.

4

IEP Development

If your child is found eligible for special education services, the team creates an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**—a legal document that outlines your child’s goals, services, accommodations, and how progress will be measured. The team has 30 days to convene this meeting after eligibility.

Here’s How the IEP Process Works:

1. Gather Information

- The team (including you) looks at evaluation results, teacher input, classroom performance, and your concerns.
- This helps identify your child’s strengths and areas where support is needed.

2. Write Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance (PLAFP)

- This section explains how your child is doing academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.
- It sets the foundation for all goals and services in the IEP.

3. Set Measurable Annual Goals

- These are specific goals your child should work toward in the next year.
- Goals are based on your child’s needs and should be clear, realistic, and trackable.

4. Decide on Special Education Services

- The team identifies what services, supports, and accommodations your child needs (such as speech therapy, small group instruction, or extra time on tests).
- Services are tailored to help your child meet their IEP goals.

5. Choose the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

- The team decides where your child will receive services—whether in the regular classroom, a special education setting, or a mix.
- By law, children should learn with their peers as much as possible.

6. Create the IEP Document

- Everything agreed upon is written into a legal document—the IEP.
- You'll get a copy, and services can't begin until you give written consent.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN IEP MEETING

IEP meetings can feel overwhelming—but with a little preparation, you'll walk in feeling more confident, clear, and ready to advocate for your child.



“I've been advocating for my child within IEP meetings from pre-k to now 6th grade. I've learned that you know your child best and with that you are their biggest advocate. I recommend learning about special education law and your rights as a parent. Wrightslaw has great books for this. Once you have all that knowledge IEP meetings can become easier.”

– Ellen Popov

QUICK TIPS: IEP MEETING PREP



Review the evaluation

Make notes about what's working and what's not.



Know your rights

You're an equal team member. Ask questions, request clarity, and take your time.



Bring documents

Include work samples, report cards, emails, and outside evaluations.



Request a draft of the IEP

Ask to review the proposed IEP before the meeting to give you time to prepare.



Write down your top concerns and goals

Think of 3–5 key points you want to discuss.



You don't have to sign on the spot

Take time to review the IEP before giving consent.









Invite a support person

You can bring a friend, advocate, or professional.

5 Services Begin

Once the IEP is signed, your child begins receiving the supports and services outlined in the plan. The IEP is reviewed at least once a year and can be adjusted as your child grows and changes.

WHAT TO DO AFTER SERVICES BEGIN: MONITORING PROGRESS

-  **Stay in regular communication with the school.** Check in with your child’s teachers, therapists, or case manager. Ask how your child is doing with the supports in place.
-  **Review progress reports and IEP goals.** Schools must provide regular updates—usually each grading period—on how your child is progressing toward their IEP goals. Read these closely.
-  **Track changes at home.** Note improvements or concerns in behavior, learning, or mood. Your observations matter just as much as school data.
-  **Ask for data, not just opinions.** You have the right to see the specific progress data collected for each IEP goal.
-  **Request an IEP meeting if needed.** If you notice your child isn’t making expected progress—or is making great progress and might need different goals—you can ask to revisit the IEP at any time.
-  **Keep everything organized.** Maintain a folder with IEP documents, communication logs, progress notes, and your own observations.

“...MY IEP ISN’T BEING FOLLOWED.”

What to do:

Start by documenting the issue and ask for a meeting with your child’s teacher or case manager.

Tip:

Request a formal IEP meeting in writing if the issue continues.

Helpful tool:

Georgia DOE Parent Rights Handbook

gadoe.org/parent-family-resources

WHAT TO KNOW AFTER IEP SERVICES BEGIN

Your Child’s Case Manager

Every IEP student has a case manager—usually a special ed teacher—who makes sure services are happening, tracks progress and shares updates, and schedules meetings and is your main contact.

Ask for their name, email, and phone number!

IEP Meeting Notices: Schools must give you at least 10 days notice before a meeting. This is called a Notice of Meeting, or NOM. Meetings should be at a time and place that works for you.

Can't Attend in Person? You have the right to join by phone or video.

Who Can Come With You? Bring a translator, advocate, or anyone who knows your child well. You don't have to attend alone.

What do I do if I disagree with the IEP? You must receive a Prior Written Notice (PWN) whenever the school proposes or refuses to change your child's IEP.

You should get a PWN when the school:

- Says no to a request (like new services or evaluations)
- Wants to add, remove, or change a service or goal
- Changes your child's placement
- Makes any major IEP decision — especially if you disagree

PWN must include:

- What the school is doing (or not doing)
- Why they made that decision
- What other options were considered
- What data or info was used



Parent Pro-Tip: Keep a notebook

Stay organized by keeping a dedicated notebook (or digital doc) for your child's special education journey. Use it to:

- Track IEP meetings, dates, and notes
- Record conversations with school staff
- Write down questions or concerns as they come up
- Log your child's progress or challenges at home
- Keep copies of all work samples, data, reports, IEPs, and evaluations.

Having everything in one place makes it easier to advocate effectively — and ensures nothing gets lost in the shuffle.

Important Services to Know About

HOSPITAL/HOMEBOUND (HHB) SERVICES

If your child cannot attend school for a long time due to medical reasons, they may qualify for **Hospital/Homebound services**. This means:

- Teachers or specialists come to your home or hospital to provide instruction.
- Your child can keep learning and stay on track with their IEP goals.
- Ask the school if you think your child needs this—usually a doctor’s note is required.

MIDDLE SCHOOL & HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

As your child moves into middle and high school, it’s important to start planning for the future. Transition planning helps your child:

- Build skills for independence, work, and adult life.
- Learn about options like further education, job training, or community services.
- Participate in setting their own goals and decisions when appropriate.

TRANSITION SERVICES WITH GVRA (GEORGIA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCY)

Starting by age 14 (sometimes earlier), your child can begin working with **GVRA**, a state agency that helps youth with disabilities prepare for work and adult life. GVRA can:

- Provide job training, career counseling, and support.
- Help with job placement and independent living skills.
- Coordinate with your child’s IEP team to support their goals.

Ask your school or case manager about connecting with GVRA as part of the transition process.

BILINGUAL ACCESS AND SUPPORTS

If your family speaks a language other than English, your child has the right to:

- Receive special education and related services in a language they understand.
- Have interpreters or translated materials at meetings and for important documents.
- Be assessed fairly in their native language to understand their needs accurately.

Make sure to tell the school your language preference and ask for bilingual supports if needed.

School Choice Options for Students with Disabilities

Georgia families have school choice options when a child has a disability:

THE GEORGIA SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOLARSHIP (SB10)

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) program provides scholarships for qualifying Georgia public school students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan in specified areas during the previous school year who meet the requirements to qualify for an award. These scholarship funds may be used to offset the cost of attending a private school that participates in the scholarship program.

Learn more: <https://gadoe.org/parent-family-resources/georgia-special-needs-scholarship/>

GEORGIA PROMISE SCHOLARSHIP

This program offers state-funded education savings accounts for students who meet certain eligibility requirements. These funds can be used for private school tuition, therapies, tutors, and curriculum. See if you qualify: <https://georgiapromisescholarship.org>.

Option	What Is It	You Must	Notes
Intra-District Transfer	Move within your district	Provide own transport and be approved by the district	If services available, you must pay tuition
Inter-District Transfer	Move to another district	Provide own transport and must be approved by the district	Acceptance if there is space available
GSNS Private School	Scholarship for private school	Meet eligibility	Covers only tuition at participating schools
State Schools	Specialized schools for deaf/blind	Provide own transport	Must be appropriate to child's needs
Charter	Public schools in person or online	Apply/enroll as directed	Special Ed rights apply

KEY GEORGIA RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

- Special Education Help Desk – Georgia Department of Education
Phone: 404-656-3963 or 1-800-311-3267
Email: spedhelpdesk@doe.k12.ga.us
- Georgia Dyslexia Handbook:
<https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Literacy/Documents/Dyslexia/GaDOE-Dyslexia-Handbook.pdf>
- Parent to Parent of Georgia: <https://www.p2pga.org>
- Georgia Advocacy Office: <https://thegao.org>
- IDEA Parent Guide (Wrightslaw): <https://wrightslaw.com/info/idea.parent.guide.htm>

SPECIAL EDUCATION GLOSSARY

504 Plan - A legal plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that provides accommodations for students with disabilities in general education settings.

Accommodations - Changes in how a student learns or shows what they know, without changing what is being taught (e.g., extra time on tests, preferential seating).

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) - A civil rights law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination in public life, including schools.

AT (Assistive Technology) - Tools or devices that help a student access learning (e.g., speech-to-text software, communication devices).

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) - A plan, based on an FBA, that uses positive strategies to support a student's behavior.

Child Find - A legal requirement that schools must identify, locate, and evaluate all children who may need special education services.

Due Process - A formal legal process to resolve disagreements between families and schools about special education.

Eligibility Meeting - A meeting where the team decides if a student qualifies for special education services under IDEA.

Evaluation - Tests and assessments used to see if a student has a disability and qualifies for special education.

Extended School Year (ESY) - Special education services provided beyond the normal school year or school day, often to prevent skill loss.

FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) - The right of every student with a disability to receive a free education that meets their unique needs.

FBA (Functional Behavior Assessment) - A process to figure out why a behavior is happening and how to best support the student.

Hospital/Homebound (HHB) - Teaching provided at home or in the hospital when a student cannot attend school for medical reasons.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) - The federal law that requires schools to provide special education services to eligible students.

IEE (Independent Educational Evaluation) - An outside evaluation done by a professional not employed by the school, usually requested when parents disagree with the school's evaluation.

IEP (Individualized Education Program) - A written plan that describes a student's learning goals, services, accommodations, and supports.

IEP Team - The group that creates and reviews the IEP. It must include the parent, at least one regular education teacher, at least one special education teacher, a school representative (LEA), someone who can explain evaluations, and the student when transition is discussed (by age 16).

LEA (Local Education Agency) - The school district, or the representative from the district who has authority over special education decisions.

LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) - The idea that students with disabilities should learn with their peers without disabilities as much as possible.

Manifestation Determination (MDR) - A meeting to decide if a student's behavior is directly related to their disability.

Mediation - A voluntary process where parents and schools meet with a neutral third person to solve disagreements.

Modifications - Changes to what a student is expected to learn (e.g., shorter assignments, alternate curriculum).

OSEP (Office of Special Education Programs) - A federal office that oversees states' special education programs.

OSERS (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services) - A federal office that supports programs for people with disabilities, including OSEP.

OCR (Office for Civil Rights) - A federal agency that enforces disability rights laws in schools. Parent Rights/Procedural Safeguards – Legal rights that protect parents and students and explain how parents can be involved in decisions.

PLAFP (Present Level of Academic and Functional Performance) - A section of the IEP that describes what a student can do and where they need support.

PWN (Prior Written Notice) - A written notice schools must give before starting, changing, or refusing special education services.

Related Services - Extra supports (like speech therapy, OT, transportation, or counseling) that help a student benefit from special education.

SB10 (Georgia Special Needs Scholarship) - A Georgia program that allows students with IEPs to use state funds to attend approved private schools.

SEA (State Education Agency) - The Georgia Department of Education, which oversees all public schools, including special education.

Service Minutes - The specific amount of time a student will receive special education or related services, written in the IEP.

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) - Teaching that is adapted to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability.

Stay Put - A protection that lets a student remain in their current program while a dispute is being resolved.

Supplementary Aids and Services - Supports that help a student learn with peers in general education (e.g., visual schedules, paraprofessional support).

Transition Plan/Services - A required part of the IEP by age 16 in Georgia that helps students prepare for life after high school, such as jobs, college, or independent living.

UDL (Universal Design for Learning) - A teaching approach that gives all students different ways to learn and show what they know.