

The
**Survival
Guide**
for New
Special Education
Teachers

SECOND EDITION

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Foreword to the Second Edition

The idea for *The Survival Guide* originated from talking to graduating students who were nervous about starting their first teaching jobs and to CEC members who were new teachers and who were feeling stressed about the decisions they were making in their own classrooms. We understood how they felt: You can complete the coursework, the in-class placements, and student teaching, but nothing truly prepares you for your own classroom except having your own classroom.

The Council for Exceptional Children responded to the need to support new special education teachers when it published the first edition of the *Guide* in 1994. We knew that our compilation of tips and strategies needed to be easy to read, and that we should include lists and helpful strategies that new teachers could modify to meet their classroom needs. We also wanted to remind these newest additions to our professional family that they had the tools they needed to be successful and that there were always others close by to whom they could turn for support and assistance.

At first, we were a little surprised at the response and the success of the book. That it has continued to be successful for so many years—that so many new teachers turned to our *Guide* to help them navigate their first years in the classroom—has been rewarding to us in many ways. We are grateful for the opportunity to have helped so many teachers and hope that the *Guide* was instrumental in their continuing in the profession.

This new edition of *The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers* retains the spirit and purpose of our first edition and reflects some of the changes in federal legislation and regulations that have occurred in the intervening decades. It also acknowledges the changing roles of the special education teacher and the challenges that these teachers face in the 21st-century classroom.

Teaching is a privilege, a challenge, and a joy. It can be one of the most difficult jobs there is—but is surely one of the most rewarding. We are sure that *The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers* will prove to be an essential support to new teachers for many years to come, giving teachers the information, resources, support, and confidence they need to thrive.

Mary Kemper Cohen

Maureen Gale

Joyce M. Meyer

Preface

This second edition of *The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers* is intended to be used as a guide, a resource, and a reference. We wrote it keeping in mind the challenges that new special educators face, and its content reflects what we believe to be the most essential information to support you, the new special education teacher, during your first few years of teaching—and beyond.

The Survival Guide provides practical advice and resources that are integrated with research and evidence-based practices to support the many responsibilities of special education teachers. The book discusses instruction and behavior management as well as tips for collaborating with families and resources to develop and track individualized IEP goals. We hope it will enrich your practice and support you in your journey.

The first few years of teaching can often be overwhelming, yet also incredibly fulfilling. Many teachers report that it is a blur; using the reflections and resources in the chapters will support your teaching and enhance your practice through the years to come. While writing the book, we were given the incredible gift of engagement with so many teachers, paraprofessionals, itinerant teachers, and administrators in the field. We were encouraged and graciously supported by our peers while compiling this edition of *The Survival Guide*. We know what the research says about attrition rates; our wish for new teachers is for you to know, even in your toughest moments, that you are supported by your peers and by everyone who is committed to making a difference in the lives of children with exceptionalities.

This book is the second edition of *The Survival Guide*. The first, published in 1994 and written by Mary Kemper Cohen, Maureen Gale, and Joyce Meyer, was for many years an inspiration to and lifesaver for new teachers. We are indebted to Mary, Maureen, and Joyce for their unique contribution to the field, and for their support of and encouragement to us in developing the second edition.

This book would not be possible without Lorraine Sobson, CEC's Publications Manager, who provided guidance, encouragement, and a keen eye for structuring our story—and also assembled a top-notch production team to see it through. Thanks to our copy editor, Pamela Tatz; the book designer, Jim DeVall; and our proofreader, Deborah Whitley. We are also grateful to Lorraine's predecessor, Kathleen McLane, who originally contacted us regarding developing a new edition of the *Guide*.

We are continually grateful to Margo Mastropieri and Tom Scruggs for their guidance and mentorship. For their inspiration we thank Amanda Hicks, Marymount graduate student extraordinaire; Peggy Richards and Patricia Gander, who truly exemplify ideal paraprofessionals; our colleagues in the research field Kelly Brady, Danette Allen Bronaugh, Yojanna Cuenca-Carlino, and Sara Mills; and all of the special education teachers who shared their stories with us, and whose quotes pepper the pages of this book. We would also like to extend our gratitude to our supportive and incredible families.

Welcome to Your Professional World!

Get ready to dive in! You have been training for your first teaching job for years. Most likely, something in your life inspired you to work with exceptional students, and you want to help others (Fish & Stephens, 2010). You will encounter many different types of students. Some will challenge your patience. Others will inspire you. Inside every child is a gift, waiting to be acknowledged and nurtured. As a teacher, you will learn your students' gifts and can help them find their "genius" within.

"Every child deserves a champion ... an adult who will never give up with them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be."

- Rita Pierson

Education Settings

Special education teachers instruct students in a variety of environments. Some teachers have their own classrooms. Other teachers are itinerant, moving from classroom to classroom with a cart. Still others have varying responsibilities in a variety of classrooms, or work among schools as itinerant specialists or consultants. Regardless of where you teach, being able to organize your work and materials is critical. As a new special educator, you may feel overwhelmed by the variety of potential teaching environments and settings. Remember to breathe, and know that you can design each space to meet your students' needs (and take a look at Chapter 3, which discusses ways to organize your materials and environment in ways that facilitate student learning).

With the increased inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings, many special educators co-teach in inclusive classrooms with general education teachers. Some special education teachers "pull out" students for specialized instruction in resource rooms or "push in" services at different times of the day. Still others instruct students in self-contained

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Why did you make special education your career? What prompted you to begin this journey? Your passion is an important driving force that will help you get through your first year and empower you in the future. What are your inspirations and aspirations? Reflect on the work that brought you to this point.

“My co-teacher loves the challenge of teaching exceptional learners, and we partner to teach all students. My co-teacher’s patience, tenacity, and willingness to incorporate multiple modalities of teaching is awesome. When we collaborate, we create engaging lessons that enhance the learning of all students. Students in our class have no idea that I am a special education teacher! We are true partners.”

—Third-year special education teacher, middle school History

classrooms or in virtual classrooms. You may have several of these roles throughout your career, and some special educators even serve in multiple positions in a single day. Review your school’s expectations for your role. The reality is that, as a special educator, you need to be flexible and ready to respond to the needs of your students, in whatever way best fits their needs.

Co-Teaching in a General Education Classroom

Most students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In 2011, approximately 61% of students with disabilities were educated in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day. Consequently, it’s very likely that at some point in your career you will co-teach with general education teachers in inclusive classrooms.

Co-teaching is a collaborative partnership between special and general education teachers to plan, instruct, and assess students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom (Friend & Bursuck, 2009). You will need to plan lessons collaboratively with your general education teachers in such a way that instruction meets the unique learning needs of students on your caseload. Many students require classroom or testing accommodations. It is important to communicate their accommodations and learning needs to your co-teachers. Figure 1.1 lists common testing accommodations and their classroom correspondence; you can use this form to organize this information for the students on your caseload and as a checklist to ensure you’ve shared the information with relevant teaching staff and testing administrators—it’s included in Appendix A, along with other templates and checklists intended to support you in managing your work as a new special educator.

Self-Contained and Resource Rooms

If you are assigned to a *self-contained setting*, you will instruct students in small groups. Individualized education program (IEP) teams place students in self-contained classrooms by examining students’ learning needs. When IEP teams determine that students need specialized and individualized instruction specifically

FIGURE 1.1. Testing and Classroom Accommodations

Testing and Classroom Accommodations		Students					
Teacher/Classroom	Accommodations						
Flexible schedule	Extended time						
	Frequent breaks/Flash Pass						
Group size	Small group						
	Individual						
Environmental accommodations	Preferential seating						
	Adaptive or special furniture						
	Visual organization						
Visual aids	Place keeper						
	Graphic organizer						
	Assistive technology						
	Visual schedules						
Amplification	Assistive listening device						
Large print	Large print						
Assistance with directions	Shortened instructions						
	Simplifying/claryfing directions						
	Reading directions aloud						
Reading in English	Directions						
	Assignments						
Audio	Access to audio materials						
Dictionary	Bilingual dictionary						
Alternate means of response	Opportunity to respond orally						
	Mark in assignment document						
	Record answers on tape						
Math aids	Number line						
	Fraction bar or circle						
	Calculator						
Writing utensil	Large diameter or special pencil						
	Pencil grip						
Alternate written response	Word processor						
	Integrated technology						
	Assistive technology						
Spelling aids	Spell checker						
	Spelling dictionary						
Dictation	In English to scribe						
	Integrated technology						
Simplified language	Reduced language/reading level						
Other	Organizers						
	Shortened assignment						
	Clearly defined limits/expectations						
	Positive reinforcement system						
	Behavior intervention plan						

Note. Adapted from *Curriculum/Classroom Accommodations and Modifications*, Fairfax County Public Schools (Virginia) Department of Special Services. Retrieved from <http://www.fcps.edu/it/forms/sep308.pdf>.

“I loved teaching self-contained classes. My students were so excited to be together and away from the large group. I was able to go in depth and offer additional supports that the larger classrooms couldn’t manage. We built a strong classroom with high expectations and lifelong study skills.”

—Seventh-year special education teacher, middle school English

designed to meet their learning needs in a small, flexible environment, they may recommend resource room or self-contained learning environments. Students with more significant learning and behavior needs are usually placed in self-contained classes. You may be assisted by a paraprofessional in your self-contained classes.

Resource room teachers also work with small groups, whether they are push-in or pull-out resources for student support. Resource room teachers who use pull-out may have their own small room or office in which they meet with students in small groups to remediate and support classroom instruction. Push-in refers to coming into a general education classroom to offer

As an itinerant teacher, I have the opportunity to work within multiple school communities and school cultures.

I develop relationships with many different types of students and teachers.

I love working within these communities to find solutions that will mitigate my students' needs to help them learn more effectively.

—**Veteran itinerant teacher serving Grades K–12**

support within the classroom. Again, the special education teacher works with individuals or small groups on needed skills for their individual learning needs. A resource teacher may work in 15- to 30-minute intervals throughout the day. This schedule is a balancing act and requires the support of all of the classroom teachers who utilize your expertise.

Itinerant and Virtual Instruction

Itinerant teachers provide special education services in multiple schools, so they must navigate and manage multiple school cultures and students. Some itinerant teachers support students' speech and language needs, some support students with visual and hearing disorders, and some implement assistive technology. For these teachers, it is especially important to be well organized and focused on effective time management.

As technology improves, opportunities for instruction through virtual classrooms will expand. Special education instruction within the virtual classroom has the potential to expand the learning opportunities to some students with exceptional learning needs.

No matter which classroom position you hold, you will have many responsibilities. Your most critical responsibility is to your students (see Chapter 2 for more discussion regarding collaboration and co-teaching structures and supports).

Roles and Responsibilities

Special education teachers have many roles and responsibilities. These roles usually involve instruction, case management, paraprofessional management, consultation, advocacy, and school duties.

Instruction

Regardless of your role, as a special educator you will design individualized instruction, supports, and services tailored to meet the unique needs of exceptional students (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2013). Essentially, you provide students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). FAPE

and LRE are part of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2006; see <http://idea.ed.gov>). You must understand your students' individual needs in order to provide appropriate instruction, based on evidence-based practices that have proven effective for students with disabilities. As a special education teacher, you will also evaluate and assess student learning to ensure your students master requisite skills. If students are not mastering skills, then you will have to investigate other evidence-based practices that facilitate student learning. The bottom line? *Understanding student needs, evidence-based practices, and assessment is essential.* We discuss this in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Case Management

As a special education teacher, your top priority is managing your assigned students' special education services, which includes various case management responsibilities. Your assigned student caseload may include students you teach and others you support outside of the classroom. On the other hand, you might not have instructional responsibilities for your case management students. School districts throughout the United States assign teachers differing case management responsibilities. Even within a given school district, schools may differ regarding expectations of case manager responsibilities. Therefore, it is critical that at the beginning of the year you thoroughly understand your district's and your school's expectations for you as case manager.

Most often, case managers are responsible for collaborating with education specialists who are sometimes members of the IEP team (speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, behaviorists, principals, etc.), communicating and collaborating with families, managing students' IEPs, communicating IEP goals and accommodations to teachers, developing IEP goals and objectives, monitoring IEP progress, collecting data, and individualizing accommodations. The case manager checklist in Figure 1.2 (included in Appendix A) indicates some activities that relate to different areas of case manager responsibility.

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So you are a case manager ... what do your case management responsibilities look like?

FIGURE 1.2. Case Manager Checklist

Case Manager Checklist	
Area of responsibility	Activities
Managing your caseload/ knowing your students	<input type="checkbox"/> Communicate with families (e.g., send a letter or call home to introduce yourself as the student's case manager)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Review and check student files/records
	<input type="checkbox"/> Manage and coordinate with paraprofessionals
	<input type="checkbox"/> Communicate with families regarding IEP timelines
	<input type="checkbox"/> IEP compliance items as needed
	<input type="checkbox"/> Meet and welcome your students
Consulting and teaching	<input type="checkbox"/> Create "IEP at a glance" or accommodations chart for all teachers
	<input type="checkbox"/> Monitor students' IEP goals and objectives for progress
	<input type="checkbox"/> Conduct data collection, teacher narratives, and progress monitoring
	<input type="checkbox"/> Coordinate related services (e.g., speech, assistive technology and psychologist)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Create lesson plans and instructional strategies to support the IEP goals
	<input type="checkbox"/> Conduct functional behavior assessments and behavior plans
IEP maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/> Consult with outside agencies
	<input type="checkbox"/> Lead IEP and related meetings (re-evaluations, etc.)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Coordinate meetings with families and staff
	<input type="checkbox"/> Transition items with student input
	<input type="checkbox"/> Write IEPs to include input from teachers and families
	<input type="checkbox"/> Present level of performance to include data
	<input type="checkbox"/> Write measurable and appropriate goals
	<input type="checkbox"/> Monitor behavior plans
	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure compliance with all IEP and related timelines
	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure IEP compliance throughout the document
	<input type="checkbox"/> Perform IEP progress reports
Professionalism	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintain confidential copies of documents and information
	<input type="checkbox"/> Provide confidentiality and maintenance of records
	<input type="checkbox"/> Act with professional courtesy regarding timelines and expectations from teachers and related services
	<input type="checkbox"/> Communicate with families and families throughout the year
	<input type="checkbox"/> Foster positive and productive meetings
<input type="checkbox"/> Follow through and follow up with questions or concerns	
<input type="checkbox"/> Attend professional-development opportunities regarding case management	

Consulting

As a trained professional special education teacher, you will be asked to consult in many different arenas. As the manager of student IEPs, other teachers and staff will approach you for ideas, intervention strategies, behavior management advice, and more. You may be consulted for effective classroom strategies for students who receive accommodations via a Section 504 plan. Embrace your role! Focus on the skills you've developed and reflect on the knowledge you have acquired. Consulting is a practical way for you to have input in meetings regarding your students as well as other students who may be struggling or need additional interventions. Be professional, and keep a file of best practices and resources (either electronically or on paper) for your consulting role.

Managing Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals (instructional assistants) are hired to assist you with academic instruction and behavior management in the self-contained or general education classroom and enhance the inclusion of students with disabilities. Paraprofessionals assist and support teachers with an entire class, groups of students, or individual students. Paraprofessionals have potential to improve students' learning, while improving on-task behaviors and students' social skills (see also Chapter 2).

Advocacy

During your first year, you will need to self-advocate and find answers to questions for both yourself and your students. In Chapter 2, we identify key school personnel, to help you develop a network of professional mentors. As a special education teacher, you will advocate for your students. To effectively advocate, other teachers need to understand your students' rights, legal mandates, and how these relate to your state's large-scale assessments. You will also advocate for your students by communicating IEP goals, behavior plans, and other important information to teachers who work with your students. Finally, you may need to advocate for your paraprofessionals. If you want your paraprofessional trained in the particulars of different disabilities, behavior management, or specific instructional strategies, you may need to identify and recommend specific training—whether available through your district, a national education organization such as CEC, or online professional development providers.

Other Duties

Many schools require staff to participate in supporting activities throughout the school. These responsibilities are shared by all teachers, including you, and might include the following activities:

1. Lunch duty
2. Playground duty
3. Bus duty
4. Hallway monitoring
5. After-school remediation, tutoring, and mentoring

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What other duties do you have? What other staff members share these responsibilities with you?

6. Physical needs, such as coordinating feeding and bathroom breaks
7. School committees
8. Extracurricular activities

Although perhaps not necessarily your favorite responsibility, you can take advantage of these opportunities to build relationships with other teachers and staff. All teachers will have school responsibilities and other duties as assigned.

Diverse Learners and Their Needs

Student diversity encompasses disability, culture, and economic heterogeneity. Special education teachers are instrumental in facilitating collaborative classroom environments that accommodate and celebrate the gifts of every individual.

Disability Diversity

You will most likely teach students with learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional disabilities, intellectual disability, physical disabilities, and autism spectrum disorder. You may teach students with hearing or visual impairments, traumatic brain injury, or other disabilities.

Teaching students with disabilities is always an adventure. You will work with students who have incredible gifts that will amaze you. You will most likely work with students who endure extreme adversity every day. Regardless of your students' journeys, every one of them has gifts and talents to share with the world.

Take a moment before the school year begins to recognize your students' talents and the unique gifts and abilities that they will carry with them. Read their files and focus not only on their needs but what strengths they bring to the classroom. A focus on positive attributes will help you build rapport with both your students and their families. Figure 1.3 (included in Appendix A) illustrates a sample student interest inventory that you can use to learn more about your students. Use this during the first week of school to break the ice!

“In a single class, I have students with many types of disabilities. One student has an emotional disability, two students are on the autism spectrum, one student has a physical disability and uses a voice box to speak, another has a hearing impairment, and three have learning disabilities! Each student is unique in their abilities and challenges. I talk with my students about their abilities and strengths a lot. I think my students are learning to respect each other in a unique way, appreciating diversity from a mature perspective.”

—**Fifth-year special education teacher, elementary school**

FIGURE 1.3. Student Interest Inventory

Student Interest Inventory

Name _____ Birthday _____

Who are the people in your family? Who do you live with?
Do you have any pets? (If not, do you want any? What kind?)
What is your favorite sport?
What is your favorite activity or hobby?
What is your favorite television show?
What is the best book you have ever read?
Where would you like to go on vacation? Why?
What is your favorite food?
What do you want to do when you get older?
What is something your teachers did last year or the year before that you liked?
What is something your teachers did last year or the year before that you did not like?
What is the one thing you are best at doing?
What is something special about you that you want me to know?

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

During your teaching career, it is highly likely that you will teach culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. According to the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES, 2010), within 20 years CLD populations will account for approximately 40% of the American population. We know one middle-school science teacher whose classroom has students from multiple cultures. In a single class, she has students with cultural backgrounds from China, Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Ethiopia. Still, she has managed to establish an environment in which students learn together and respect each other's cultures. Most importantly, they learn that their

“In my first year of teaching, I was humbled by the experiences of many of my students. Two students were homeless, one living in a shelter and another on a friend’s family’s couch. I had a student who won a gift card in our school PBIS [positive behavior interventions and supports] program for good behavior. He gave the gift card to his grandmother so that she could buy the family groceries.”

—Third-year special education teacher, Grade 6

differences are not so great. Her students get a truly multicultural education that allows them to appreciate others.

Culture affects behaviors, beliefs, faith, communication, and interpersonal relations (Cartledge, 2011; Palawat & May, 2012). Culture also affects how people view disability (Groce, 1999; Trainor, 2010). The discussion in this chapter regarding working with diverse students (see also Nguyen, 2012) can be augmented by incorporating material from the discussion of instructional strategies in Chapter 4.

Economically Diverse Students

Most likely during your teaching career, you will teach students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) families. In 2012, 21% of children between the ages of 5 and 17 lived in poverty (NCES, 2014). The Southern Education Foundation (2015) has reported that the numbers of students attending public school from low SES families is increasing; in 2013, 51% of students attending public schools were from low SES families (Southern Education Foundation, 2015).

You may teach at a Title I school. Title I schools have a higher-than-average percentage of students from low SES families than other schools and they receive federal funding for longer school days and special programs. If you are teaching at a Title I school, you may have financial benefits such as loan-forgiveness programs and other financial incentives. It’s important to ask your administrator or human resources department about these programs and financial advantages afforded to you for working in a Title I school.

Students from low SES families face special challenges, including a higher risk of dropping out of school (NCES, 2014). Developing relationships with students so that they feel personally connected to you and your school is critical (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Research has shown that when students have positive relationships with a teacher, they feel emotionally connected and invested in school, resulting in higher grades and school completion rates (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Developing positive relationships with all students is

important. However, developing a positive relationship with a student from a low SES family can have an especially significant effect on that student's success (Murray & Malmgren, 2005).

Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) identified qualities of successful schools, particularly in supporting students from low SES families, which include the following:

- Principals and teachers have the same vision
- Students' needs drive instruction
- Teachers share instructional strategies
- Teachers explain student expectations and post expectations in their rooms
- Teachers consistently enforce expectations, providing rewards and consequences
- Teachers personally connect with students
- Teachers create and use incentives systems to facilitate positive behaviors
- Teachers reflect on their practices and make changes to improve
- Teachers are understanding of families' experiences and time constraints

The Diversity-Friendly Classroom

Understanding which qualities of schools improve students' lives and learning may help you understand ways to create a positive classroom. You may not be able to change your school's culture, but you can control your classroom culture.

Discuss your students' gifts and talents as a class.

To build a cohesive class that values diversity, discuss and share observations of your students' gifts and talents with your class as a whole. The students in your class will learn to appreciate and value themselves and their classmates in a way that no standardized test will measure.

Use person-first language. Your students are, first and foremost, people first. Person-first language is im-

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Take some time to review the IEP process in your school, your roles and responsibilities, as well as your caseload. Start a file, folder, binder, or calendar as soon as possible. Consult Chapter 5 to help you organize. Make a plan for organizing management of your students' IEPs. What are your strengths? What areas may need refreshing?



perative if you want to build a community and culture of respect. Some examples of person-first language are: “a person with a disability,” “a student with an emotional disability,” and “a student with intellectual disability.” Your students are students first.

Plan instruction that incorporates diversity. Lesson planning to meet students' heterogeneous learning needs can be tricky, especially when students have dissimilar background knowledge. Chapter 4 discusses instructional planning in detail. When planning lessons, facilitate learning by making explicit connections with students' cultures and background knowledge as much as you can. Integrating culture into lessons can be creative, fun, and engaging for students. Incorporate students' sharing of cultural traditions with other class members to expand all students' knowledge of multi-cultural ethnicities and acceptance.

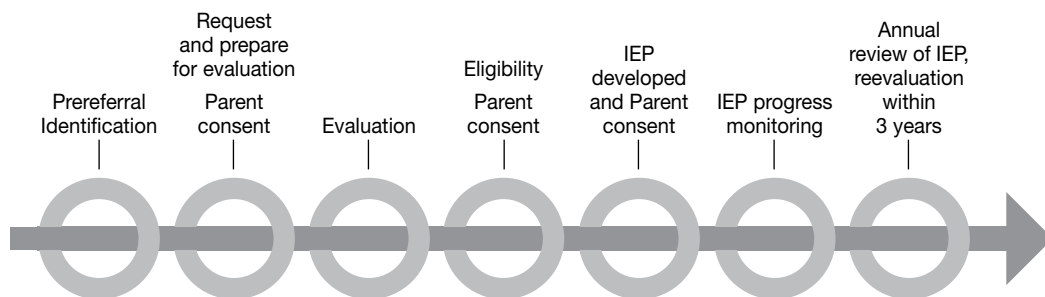
Keep an open mind. Maintain an open mind when working with individuals and families representing diverse cultures (Palawat & May, 2012). There is a range of abilities within every individual, regardless of culture. A student's ethnicity and family background does not define her.

A Word About IEPs

As we round out Chapter 1, it is important to address a primary responsibility of all special educators: students' IEPs. For some new special educators, coordinating and writing the first IEP can be scary; you may understand the process and have been trained on your school's process for creating the IEP, but putting it all together takes a great deal of collaboration. Seek out the assistance you need, from your special education department chair and other members of the IEP team, to create a plan that truly fits the needs of your student.

IEPs are a critical, essential element of your job; we discuss the topic in more depth in Chapter 5. As a start, be sure to check out the U.S. Department of Education's overview and guide to the IEP process (2015); Figure 1.4 distills the elements of this process.

FIGURE 1.4. IEP Refresher and Timeline



Referral/Request for Evaluation

Every state is required by law to identify and evaluate students with disabilities who require special education or related services. Evaluation must occur within specified time periods and parental consent is required before evaluation.

Assessments evaluate students' strengths and needs in order to determine eligibility for special education and related services, as well as special education programming. Assessments must be appropriately chosen based on individual student needs. If families disagree with the results of evaluations, they have the right to obtain independent educational evaluations (IEEs) and request payment from school districts for these IEEs.

Eligibility

School IEP teams meet to discuss student eligibility for special education and related services. Results from assessments and other information are used to determine eligibility. IDEA (2006) eligibility requirements have two prongs. First, the child must have a disability diagnosis. Second, that disability must have an educational impact.

The federal guidelines state that a school must review a child for special education eligibility within 60 calendar days "of receiving parental consent for the evaluation or, if the State establishes a timeframe within which the evaluation must be conducted, within that timeframe" (34 C.F.R. § 300.301[c]). States have different regulations regarding eligibility and it's important to understand your state's regulations. Eligibility—which we discuss further—can be a contentious issue with families (Etscheidt, 2002).

The IEP Meeting

IDEA (2006) outlines procedural rights given to families, including parental notification of meetings and access to their child's records and data (34 C.F.R. § 300). Federal and state regulations specify timeframes for notification, and school districts must follow these procedures to ensure compliance. Check with your school to see how they correspond with families; many schools or school districts have administrative assistants who establish contact with families and monitor timeframes. However, in some school districts, teachers are responsible for parental meeting correspondence. Regardless, not including families as equal partners in the IEP process is one of the most common and serious procedural errors (Christle & Yell, 2010, Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001).

To arrange a meeting, the school contacts all IEP participants, including families. Families need ample notification of the IEP meeting's purpose, time, location, and who will be attending the meeting. Families also need to understand that they have the right to invite other professionals (e.g., family counselor, educational advocate, psychoeducational evaluator) to the meeting.

In order to develop measurable IEP goals, IEP teams use information from assessments and classroom observations to identify student needs (Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006). Teams discuss students' needs, strengths, and present levels of performance. IDEA requires that IEPs must include documentation of the student's present level of performance, measurable annual goals, a progress monitoring method for collecting and reporting the student's progress, instructional strategies, and related services (34 C.F.R. § 300.346). The IEP also must include a statement regarding class placement, general education participation, state assessment participation, projected IEP start and end dates, and frequency and duration of special education services (Christle & Yell, 2010). Although the format for IEPs is not standardized among states, or perhaps even within a particular state, *every student's IEP must include these components.*

Specifically designed instructional strategies, created for students to derive meaningful educational benefit, are at the heart of special education. These strategies must be based on evidence-based practices as much as possible (Zirkel, 2011). Sometimes, evidence-based practices are not available. In these cases, your selection of instructional strategies should be based upon your students' unique needs (Etscheidt, 2002).

Families must consent to the IEP before services begin. If the parent or family disagrees, then they can negotiate with the school or request mediation. If negotiations and mediation are unsuccessful, families can file a complaint with the state educational agency or request due process.

Implementing the IEP and Progress Monitoring

The requirements of a student's IEP should be communicated to all teachers and education professionals who work with him. All teachers implement accommodations, modifications, and appropriate education programming. IDEA requires schools to track a student's progress toward meeting IEP goals and to send updates to families about the student's progress toward meeting these goals (34 C.F.R. § 300.320[a][3]). Most school districts send IEP progress reports along with students' report cards. The IEP specifies the progress monitoring method and frequency of reports. The IEP process and progress monitoring is discussed in Chapter 5 in more detail, and resources are provided to help you through the process.

Review and Re-Evaluation

Annually, IEP teams meet to revise and update students' IEPs to design a new program to meet their needs. Students' needs are re-evaluated at least every 3 years in triennial evaluations. The purpose of conducting triennial evaluations is to determine eligibility for special education and related services and assess students' needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).



CLOSING REFLECTION

Teaching is an amazing and powerful job that gives you the opportunity to change someone's life. You will meet many types of students, and balancing job responsibilities between instruction and case management will challenge you. Your first year may be overwhelming. Expect this, and embrace the journey. Be patient with yourself and remember why you first decided to become a special education teacher. Our personal mission statements often keep us going on tough days. Most important, remember that you can make a difference in the lives of many students over your career.

Make a "feel good" file to record positive feedback and experiences. It is natural to focus on negative comments. Recognize these, but give yourself a chance to shift your mindset to a proactive and positive stance. Remember: You will be amazing!