

# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO **SPECIAL** EDUCATION

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# Introduction

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With general education classroom teachers facing increased demands—from additional assessments to accountability to larger class sizes to working with students with disabilities—the profession of teaching is more complex and challenging than ever. We don't have all the answers for dealing with its every demand, but we do have concrete suggestions and descriptions of procedures and processes that can change the way teachers work with students with disabilities. Like other students, those with disabilities are expected to achieve in the general education classroom, and it is often the general education teacher who is responsible for that achievement.

This book is designed for you, the general education classroom teacher. Educating students with disabilities is most likely taking up more of your time each year. Parents and students look to you for information about learning strategies, standards, curriculum, accommodations, and modifications. There is a lot to know. Some of the issues related to students with disabilities are about paperwork and compliance, which may seem different from the content demands you face daily, but these elements are actually closely intertwined.

In this book, we address daily issues you are likely to encounter in working with students with disabilities, whether they have an individualized education program (IEP), have a 504 plan, or are not yet identified. We bring together information that will help you understand the process of how a student becomes eligible for special education services and your role in providing special education services and accommodations, and we present specific examples of what to do. We do not delve into the theory of the education of students with disabilities other than to confirm the belief in providing them with an education that improves their abilities and future possibilities. Federal law entitles them to such an education, and educational institutions are responsible for ensuring they receive it.

# 1

## Special Education and the Laws That Affect It

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In this chapter we discuss the main laws affecting special education and how they apply to you as a general education teacher. The omnibus Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provide important guidelines and, although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focuses on *all* students, it also has certain implications for students with disabilities.

To provide context, we explain what special education is—its characteristics, who receives it, its purpose and goal, why access to the general education classroom and curriculum is important, and who the various professionals are who work with students with disabilities. We also cover the rights and roles of parents of students with disabilities, again pointing out information that is important for you to know. (Keep in mind that some students with disabilities do not require special education services but may be affected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; basically, Section 504 is an anti-discrimination statute. For more about Section 504, see Chapter 5.)

### Public Law 94-142

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), which is frequently referred to as PL 94-142, provides guidance to states, allowing students with disabilities to access public education and providing financial assistance to states as supplemental funding for special education and related services. Passed in 1975, PL 94-142 mandated that in order to receive federal funding for special education, states had to comply with the law (Yell, 2015).

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## Educational Frameworks and the Pre-Referral Process

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As a general education teacher, you have a wide range of learners in your classroom, and you are constantly responding to their individual needs. A number of educational frameworks are available to help you meet these needs, and an understanding of these frameworks and of various instructional strategies will provide you more options when working with the diverse learners in your class. You will also be gathering data and making observations to determine if what you are doing is allowing your students to move forward in the curriculum. In this chapter we discuss how the Response to Intervention/Multi-Tiered System of Support, differentiated instruction, and the Universal Design for Learning can help you fulfill these responsibilities. (For information about accommodations and modifications, which are important elements of instruction for some students with disabilities, see Chapter 4.) We conclude the chapter with information about the steps to take to refer a student for special education testing.

### **Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered System of Support**

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an instructional delivery framework with layers of preventative practices that teachers can use to target students' specific needs. The practices are "preventative" in that the goal is to ultimately prevent students from needing special education and related services. RTI is based on research stemming from the Institutes for Research on Learning Disabilities (IRLDs) from 1979 to 1983, and it became prominent when IDEA was reauthorized in 2004. The reauthorization included

# 3

## The Referral and Evaluation Process

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In Chapter 2 we described various educational frameworks and processes designed to support student success in a general education setting. However, some students will not respond to the different instructional strategies, modifications, and interventions you try. At this point, you need more, and more specific, information. Does this student have a disability that is interfering with educational progress? Does this student require an individualized educational program? A referral for special education is now appropriate.

In this chapter we detail the steps to take to refer a student, discuss the process of how students become eligible for special education and related services, and highlight your role as the general education teacher. We also provide guidance in regard to what general education teachers can learn from the assessments and apply to classroom instruction and strategies. We conclude with a discussion of parents' rights within the evaluation process.

### **Referring a Student for Testing for Special Education**

If your attempts in the classroom and through the pre-referral process have not resulted in a change, and you think a student may have an underlying disability that is interfering with educational progress, the next step is to refer the student for testing to determine eligibility for special education and related services.

Once the referral is accepted, the multidisciplinary team outlined in IDEA takes responsibility. The members of this team may vary depending on individual state requirements and the area of the student's suspected disability. However, as we noted in Chapter 1, teams typically consist of

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## General Education Teachers and IEPs

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In this chapter we define and discuss the individualized education program, commonly known as the IEP and its components, focusing on the role of the general education classroom teacher as it relates to each element, as well as important things to be aware of. We conclude with a series of checklists that will help you know what to do before, during, and after an IEP meeting.

### What Is an IEP?

An individualized education program (also referred to as an “individualized education plan”) is the written map for a student’s education for the coming year, and it includes services beyond those offered to all students in the general education program. It is a formal document that is developed only after a student has been found eligible for special education and related services by a multidisciplinary team (as discussed in Chapter 3). The IEP is a legal document and a contract between the school and the parents outlining what services will be provided.

### The IEP’s multiple purposes

The IEP document itself is important because it records the specific plan the team has developed. The document can be used for several purposes, each of which we describe here. These purposes are not necessarily separate from each other and in many ways are interconnected.

**Communication.** The IEP document is a tool that all team members, including the parents, can refer to as a reminder of the plan that was agreed upon. It also serves as a tool that the multidisciplinary team can use to communicate with the various other education professionals (discussed

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## Other Students Who Require Accommodations

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In this chapter we discuss three types of students who do not meet the requirements for special education but still require accommodations. We begin by explaining Section 504, a nondiscrimination law that applies to many students who have disabilities but do not qualify for special education services. We discuss gifted and talented students in recognition of the fact that they, too, have needs that are important to address. Finally, we consider students who are at risk for failure and may or may not be receiving additional assistance, discussing both classroom and schoolwide supports.

### **What You Need to Know About Section 504**

In Chapter 1 we pointed out that some students with disabilities do not meet the qualifying criteria for special education and related services but may require some other types of services in order to have their needs met to the same degree as students without a disability. Support for these students is provided through Section 504, a brief but powerful nondiscrimination law included in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112). It extends to individuals with disabilities the same kinds of protections Congress extends to people discriminated against because of race and sex.

In the United States, all students have the right to a free public education. Section 504 ensures that students who have a disability that affects a major life function will continue to have access to that free public education despite their disability. A few common disabilities covered by Section 504 plans in schools include ADD/ADHD, nut allergies, and diabetes.



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## Transition

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In this chapter we discuss transition—its definition and components—with a focus on the role of the general education classroom teacher. We include specific recommendations for elementary and secondary education teachers and what they can do to help students with disabilities get ready for postschool life. The chapter also covers recommendations for working with preschool students as they are transitioning from early childhood special education to K–12 special education.

### Skills to Teach for Transition—and Life

The skills discussed in this section are generally thought of as incidental skills gained through experience. As teachers know, however, many students benefit from explicit instruction in these “life skills,” and students with disabilities may benefit particularly. We believe teaching these skills—all of which foster independence in school and beyond it—should be part of the curriculum from preschool through high school. Some of these will need to be retaught many times over a student’s career.

**Arriving on time.** Beginning in elementary school and continuing as temporal awareness and executive functions develop, students need to be made aware of the importance of showing up on time for classes, activities, and events. They should learn and practice strategies that will help them do so, such as planning ahead by determining how long it will take to get ready and budgeting for travel time. General education teachers in elementary and middle school should hold students accountable (to the best of the students’ ability) for showing up on time and make sure they understand the consequences of not being in a place at the appointed time.

**Asking for help.** All students need to know who they would go to for help if they have issues, concerns, or questions, and to realize that it is

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## Classroom Management and Student Behavior

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Student behavior can be challenging and can require a lot of a teacher's time and attention. All students, whether they have disabilities or are typically developing, are to be held accountable to the same school code. However, for your students with disabilities, you will need to follow different rules regarding suspension and be mindful of behavioral plans, functional behavioral assessments, and behavior rating scales. In this chapter we highlight these components and discuss what you need to know about working with students with disabilities when it comes to classroom management and student behavior.

### **Teaching Students Desired Behaviors**

As a classroom teacher, you likely will be able to teach a student vowel sounds, math facts, or how to diagram a sentence. These academic tasks are critical to a student's success, and versions of these skills are included in the summative grades included on report cards. Seldom specified in what teachers are required to teach are the behaviors necessary for classroom success, including following directions, knowing when to ask for help, knowing where to go for help, and getting along with others. To effectively participate in your class, students—whether they have a disability or not—need to be directly taught the behaviors you expect to see. If you want students to turn in their papers in one location, teach them to do so. If you want them to use only one side of the paper, teach this, along with all the other classroom behaviors you expect.

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## Service Delivery Options, Related Services, and Other Service Providers

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In this chapter we discuss the many different ways students with disabilities can receive special education services, the various settings where those services may be provided, and the other service providers who may be involved. In addition to classroom teachers, many other professionals work with students with disabilities, and they are all part of the team working to make sure students can make progress in school. As the general education teacher, you will work with these people and provide them with important information about how the student is doing in your classroom.

### **The Continuum of Services**

As we noted in Chapter 1, the laws and regulations related to the education of students with disabilities require that they receive their education in the “least restrictive environment.” This means the school district is to provide an education addressing the individual needs of the student in a setting that is as similar to the general education classroom as possible while still allowing the student to make progress in the curriculum. Only if the school cannot meet the needs of the student in the general education classroom can the student be moved to a more restrictive educational environment (Yell, 2015).

Some students have disabilities that require services that cannot be provided in the general education classroom. The IEP team is responsible for making decisions about the types and extent of services a student should receive, and where those services should be provided. The term used for the range of placements that must be available is called the “continuum of

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## Assessment, Grades, Graduation, and Diplomas

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Assessing students is an important component of education today. Tests are used to determine student progress, eligibility for services, and, increasingly, teacher and school effectiveness. The assessment of students with disabilities brings unique challenges in terms of grading, report cards, graduation, and standardized assessments. Understanding the differences and addressing the needs of students with disabilities will help you maximize student performance and use tests and assessments to evaluate performance more accurately.

This chapter focuses on district, state, and classroom-based assessments given to all students, and how these relate to students with disabilities. For information on the assessment process for determining eligibility for special education, see Chapter 2.

### Assessment

Although there are many ways to classify the kinds of assessment used in education, we'd like to begin with the simple distinction of formal versus informal. *Formal assessments* are systematic methods to ascertain what students have learned. They are often tied to standards and can be used to compare a student's functioning to that of other students. Mandated statewide assessments are perhaps the most obvious example. Formal assessments often have standardized administration procedures and standardized scoring. *Informal assessments* are those used by teachers to determine a student's level of functioning in a classroom. They include no standardized procedures for administration and scoring. Teachers use informal assessments to check in with students throughout the day, as when they ask students about math facts or their knowledge of vowel sounds, or

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## Putting It All Together

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Throughout this book we have highlighted the importance of the general education teacher's role in providing services for students with disabilities. Often they are the first ones to notice that a student needs assistance. The data they collect are used to make the initial referral for testing for special education and to help determine the level of functioning of the student compared to peers, which makes the case for determining eligibility for special education and related services. After the evaluation is completed and the student is found eligible, general education teachers often provide the majority of educational services the student receives. Their importance in working with students who receive special education cannot be overstated. In this chapter we summarize and reiterate key points related to what you, as a general education teacher, need to know to work effectively with students with disabilities.

### Roles and Responsibilities

Given that general education teachers have a key role in providing services to students with disabilities, it is helpful to clarify their various roles and responsibilities and to highlight certain points. In this section, we briefly describe key aspects of the work (each of which we have also discussed in other parts of this book).

**Planning curriculum.** As the general education teacher, you are the curriculum specialist on the IEP team. You know the current curriculum and understand how to plan for and implement it. For students with disabilities, this may require accommodations and modifications, but in any case, effective planning before instruction is important, as are reflecting on student progress, noting effective strategies for the individual student, and