

Communicating with Your Child's School Through Letter Writing

A publication of the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities



Throughout your child's school years, there is always a need to communicate with the school's teachers, administrators, and others concerned with your child's education. There are also times when the school needs to communicate with you. This is particularly true when your child has a disability and is receiving special education services. Some of this communication is informal, such as phone calls, comments in your child's notebook, a chat when picking your child up from school or at a school function. Other forms of communication are more formal and need to be written down.

Letters provide both you and the school with a record of ideas, concerns, and suggestions. Putting your thoughts on paper gives you the opportunity to take as long as you need to:

- ◆ state your concerns,
- ◆ think over what you've written,
- ◆ make changes, and
- ◆ have someone else read over the letter and make suggestions.

Letters also give people the opportunity to go over what's been suggested or discussed. A lot of confusion and misunderstanding can be avoided by writing down thoughts and ideas.

However, writing letters is a skill. Each letter you write will differ according to the situation, the person to whom you are writing, and the issues you are discussing. This *Parent's Guide* will help you in writing to the professionals involved in your child's special education.

Note: The term "parent" is used throughout this *Parent's Guide* to include natural or adoptive parents, foster parents, surrogate parents, legal guardians, or any primary caregiver who is acting in the role of a parent.

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*is the
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Background Information

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is our nation's federal special education law. Under the IDEA, children and youth with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education, also called FAPE.

Using the IDEA as a guideline, each state develops rules on how special education services will be provided to children with disabilities. Each local public school district in every state develops its own policies based on the federal and state regulations. Some states give parents more rights and protections than are in the federal law, so it's important for you to know about your state's special education regulations. Information on how you can get copies of federal, state, and local special education regulations is provided at the end of this *Parent's Guide*.

Under IDEA, each child receiving special education services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a written document that the school and parents develop together. Among other things, the IEP:

- describes the child's needs, and
- lists the services that he or she will receive.

A flow chart on the next pages shows how the special education process works, beginning with "I think my child may have a problem" and ending with the services that are provided to your child. If your child is receiving special education services, there will be times you will need to write to your child's school. This *Parent's Guide* provides examples of letters you may want to write—see the list on the right.

The sample letters in this guide are organized into groups according to the occasions when you might want to write them.

Start, Student Records, Follow-up Issues 1-4, with Sample Letters

1. *Discuss a problem*
2. *Request a copy of your child's records*
3. *Write a follow-up letter*
4. *Give positive feedback*

Evaluation, IEPs, Placement Issues 5-9, with Sample Letters

5. *Request an evaluation for special education services*
6. *Request an independent evaluation*
7. *Request a meeting to review your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP)*
8. *Request that your child's placement be changed*
9. *Let the school know that you intend to place your child in a private school at public expense*

Invoke Safeguards to Resolve Disputes Issues 10-13, with Sample Letters

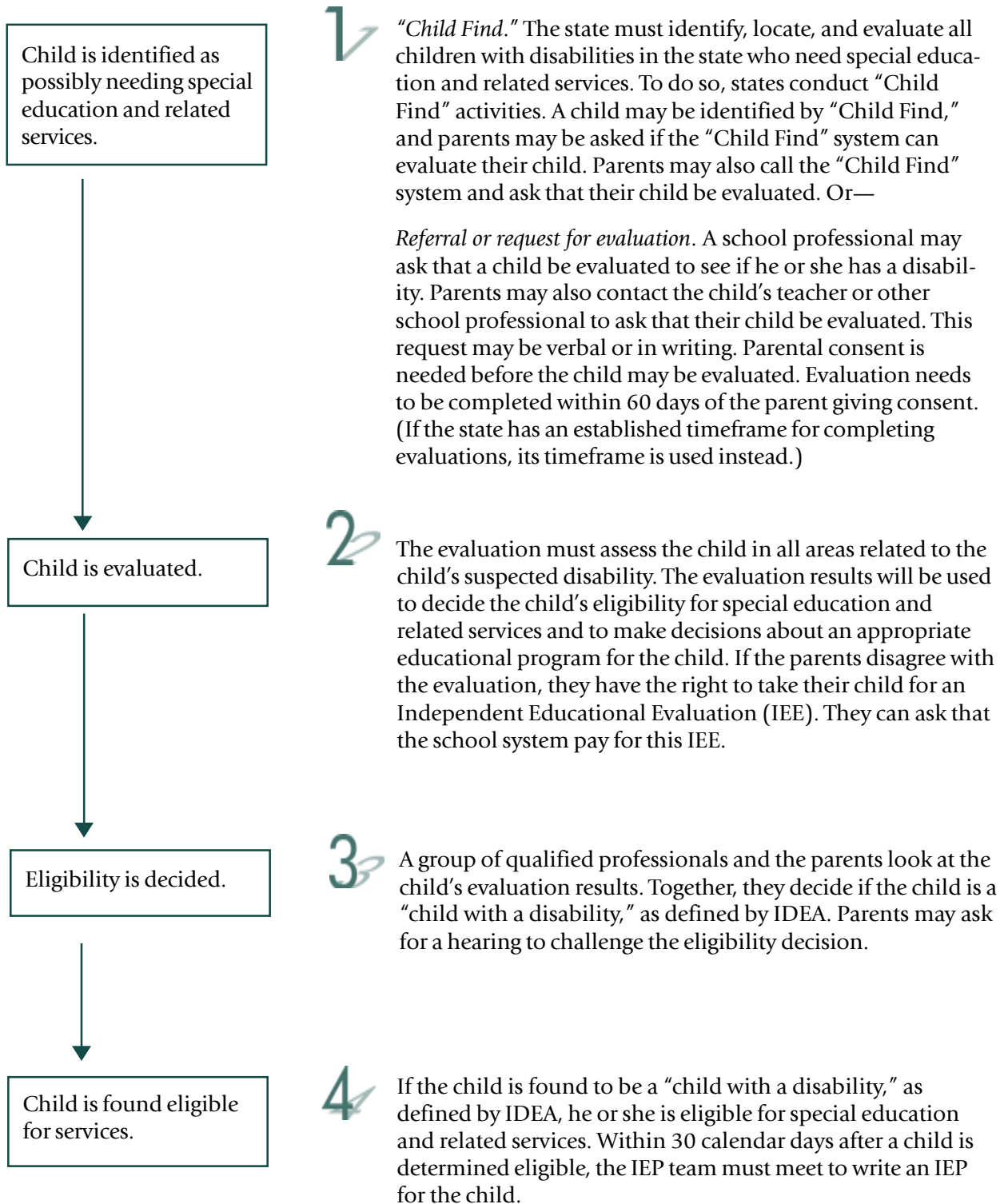
10. *Request that the school give you notice of its intended actions or refusal to take an action (called "prior written notice")*
11. *Request mediation when you and the school don't agree*
12. *Request a due process hearing when you and the school don't agree*
13. *File a complaint with the State*



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The Basic Special Education Process under IDEA 2004

Here's a brief look at how a student is identified as having a disability and needing special education and related services.



The Basic Special Education Process under IDEA 2004 (cont.)

Once the student has been found eligible for services, the IEP must be written. The two steps below *summarize* what is involved in writing the IEP.

IEP meeting is scheduled.

5

The school system schedules and conducts the IEP meeting. School staff must:

- contact the participants, including the parents;
- notify parents early enough to make sure they have an opportunity to attend;
- schedule the meeting at a time and place agreeable to parents and the school;
- tell the parents the purpose, time, and location of the meeting;
- tell the parents who will be attending; and
- tell the parents that they may invite people to the meeting who have knowledge or special expertise about the child.

IEP meeting is held and the IEP is written.

6

The IEP team gathers to talk about the child's needs and write the student's IEP. Parents and the student (when appropriate) are part of the team. If the child's placement is decided by a different group, the parents must be part of that group as well.

Before the school system may provide special education and related services to the child for the first time, the parents must give consent. The child begins to receive services as soon as possible after the IEP is written and this consent is given.

If the parents do not agree with the IEP and placement, they may discuss their concerns with other members of the IEP team and try to work out an agreement. If they still disagree, parents can ask for mediation, or the school may offer mediation. Parents may file a complaint with the state education agency and may request a due process hearing, at which time mediation must be available.

The Basic Special Education Process under IDEA 2004 (cont.)

Here is a brief summary of what happens *after* the IEP is written.

Services are provided.

7

The school makes sure that the child's IEP is being carried out as it was written. Parents are given a copy of the IEP. Each of the child's teachers and service providers has access to the IEP and knows his or her specific responsibilities for carrying out the IEP. This includes the accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided to the child, in keeping with the IEP.

Progress is measured and reported to parents.

8

The child's progress toward the annual goals is measured, as stated in the IEP. His or her parents are periodically informed of their child's progress toward achieving the annual goals (such as through the use of quarterly or other periodic reports, perhaps issued at the same time as report cards).

Progress is measured and reported to parents.

IEP is reviewed.

9

The child's IEP is reviewed by the IEP team at least once a year, or more often if the parents or school ask for a review. If necessary, the IEP is revised. Parents, as team members, must be invited to attend these meetings. Parents can make suggestions for changes, can agree or disagree with the IEP goals, and agree or disagree with the placement.

If parents do not agree with the IEP and placement, they may discuss their concerns with other members of the IEP team and try to work out an agreement. There are several options, including additional testing, an independent evaluation, or asking for mediation or a due process hearing. They may also file a complaint with the state education agency.

IEP is reviewed.

Child is reevaluated.

10

At least every three years the child must be reevaluated, unless parents and the school system agree that a reevaluation is not necessary. The purpose of the reevaluation is to find out if the child continues to be a "child with a disability," as defined by IDEA, and what the child's educational needs are. Parents must give their consent for their child's reevaluation.

A child may be reevaluated more often if conditions warrant or if the child's parent or teacher asks for a new evaluation.

Letter Writing in General



As was said in Part A, each state and school district has its own guidelines for special education. These guidelines tell you about the different steps, rights, and responsibilities in the special education process. Call the main office at your child's school and ask for a copy of your district's written guidelines. Also:

- ◆ Put all your requests in writing, even if it's not required by your school district. A letter or email avoids confusion and provides everyone with a record of your request.
- ◆ Always, always, always keep a copy of each letter or email you send. It's useful to have a folder just to store copies of these letters or emails.

How long will it take to get an answer to my letter or email?

Some special education guidelines give the amount of time a school has to respond to a parent's request, some don't. The IDEA says that schools must respond in a "timely manner" or within a "reasonable" period of time. Some states and districts actually define this period by a certain number of days. To find out what is true in your area, check your state and local regulations.

If you have not heard from the school within 10 working days of sending your letter or email, phone the office to make sure the school received your communication. Ask when you can expect an answer. If you have asked for a meeting or other services that require coordinating with several other people, it may take some time to do this. However, it is reasonable for the school to let you know that your request is being worked on.

If you need a letter answered in less than ten working days (for instance, if you are moving or have other urgent reasons), let

the school know that you have sent—or are delivering—a letter and need a response as soon as possible (or by a specific date). That way, the staff can try to get you a quick response.

To whom do I send my letter?

Many letters will go to your child's teacher. You will send others to the school principal. In some instances, the letter may need to go to the local Director of Special Education or other administrator. Call the person's office to make sure of the spelling of his or her name and the correct mailing address.

Some school districts handle special education requests at the local school level. Other districts assign this job to different administrative people who don't work right in your child's school building. If you are not sure to whom to send your letter, or cannot get good information on who to write, you can always send your letter to the principal. If the principal is not the one directly responsible for answering your request, he or she still is responsible for giving your request to the right person.

Also, send a copy of your letter to your child's teacher, so that he or she will be aware of what is going on and know of your concerns.

In general, what do I say in my letter?

When writing any business letter, it is important to keep it short and to the point. First, start by asking yourself the following questions and state the answers in your letter:

- ◆ Why am I writing?
- ◆ What are my specific concerns?
- ◆ What are my questions?
- ◆ What would I like the person to do about this situation?

A letter avoids confusion and provides everyone with a record of your request.

- ◆ What sort of response do I want: a letter, a meeting, a phone call, or something else?

Each letter you write should include the following basic information:

- ◆ Put the date on your letter.
- ◆ Give your child's full name and the name of your child's main teacher or current class placement.
- ◆ Say what you want, rather than what you don't want. Keep it simple.
- ◆ Give your address and a daytime phone number where you can be reached.
- ◆ Always end your letter with a "thank you."

What are some other tips to keep in mind?

You want to make a good impression so that the person reading your letter will understand your request and say "yes." Remember, this person may not know you, your child, or your child's situation. Keep the tone of your letter pleasant and businesslike. Give the facts without letting anger, frustration, blame, or other negative emotions creep in. Some letter-writing tips include:

- ◆ After you write your first draft, put the letter aside for a day or two. Then look at it again and revise it with fresh eyes.
- ◆ Read your letter as though you are the person receiving it. Is your request clear? Have you included the important facts? Does your letter ramble on and on? Is it likely to offend, or is the tone businesslike?
- ◆ Have someone else read your letter for you. Is your reason for writing clear? Can the reader tell what you are asking for? Would the reader say "yes" if he or she received this letter? Can your letter be improved?
- ◆ Use spell check and grammar check on the computer. Or ask someone reliable to edit your letter before you send it.
- ◆ Keep a copy for your records.

Who can help me with this?

There are many people who can help you with letter writing and other tasks related to your child's special needs. There are disability and parent organizations in every state that can help.

- ◆ Local chapters of state, regional, and national disability advocacy organizations can work with you. Most disability organizations are concerned with issues related to a specific disability as well as broader issues of raising a child with a disability. Their membership often includes both parents and professionals.
- ◆ Each state has a federally-funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI). The PTI staff can help explain the laws, policies, and procedures for special education in your state. They can also help with problem-solving ideas. NICHCY lists the PTIs on its State Resource Sheets, under the category "Organizations Especially for Parents." Find our state sheets online, at: <http://www.nichcy.org/families-community/states/>
- ◆ Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) also serve families of children and young adults with disabilities. They provide information and training to help families obtain an appropriate education and services for their children with disabilities. They help families connect with community resources.
- ◆ State agencies, like the Developmental Disability (DD) Council, Protection and Advocacy Agency (P&A), or state Department of Education can also help explain procedures and make suggestions. You'll also find these listed on NICHCY's State Resource Sheets, online at: <http://www.nichcy.org/families-community/states/>
- ◆ Many states now fund parent resource centers in local school districts. Ask your Director of Special Education if there's a local parent resource center in your area.



Sample Letters



Writing to Discuss a Problem

When might I want to write to my child's school?

Sometimes your child may have a particular problem at school. You may have talked to your child's teacher about this concern. The two of you may have written notes back and forth or talked on the phone. If it seems like nothing is happening to resolve your concern, then you may want to write a formal

letter. Perhaps the informal communication hasn't been as clear as you think. Maybe you feel that the seriousness of your concern isn't fully understood. By writing a letter, the school will learn that you consider the matter to be an important one that needs to be addressed.

You can write about any concern—an IEP issue, a general education issue, school-yard bullying, or the need to help your child's social skills or improve behavior. There are no rules as to the type of problem you can write about. Any school problem is worth writing about if it is having a negative impact on your child and you need the school's assistance to resolve it.

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Principal
Name of School
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Principal's name),

In this paragraph say who you are and give your child's full name and current class placement. Say something positive about your child's situation here, before you state your reason for writing.

BRIEFLY, explain why you are writing. Give *relevant* history and facts that support your concerns. (For example, your 3rd grader is struggling in school and you want to ask for help. You might say that your child's school work has been getting worse throughout the year. That fact is relevant. Something from your child's infancy probably isn't.)

In this paragraph state what you would like to have happen or what you would like to see changed. You may BRIEFLY say what you would *not* like, or what has been tried and not worked. However, spend most of this paragraph saying what you want.

Say what type of response you would prefer. For instance, do you need to meet with someone, do you want a return letter or email, or will a phone call be preferable?

Finally, give your daytime phone number and state that you look forward to hearing from the person soon or give a date ("Please respond by the 15th"). End the letter with "Thank you for your attention to this matter."

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: your child's teacher
other staff



Note:

The "cc:" at the bottom of the letter means you are sending a copy of your letter to the people listed after the cc. If you write to the Director of Special Education about a problem at your child's school, you should copy the principal. If you write to the principal about a problem, you should copy your child's teacher or other staff involved with your child. This follows the "chain of command." It also lets people involved know your concerns and that you are taking steps to resolve these concerns.

2 Requesting Your Child's Records

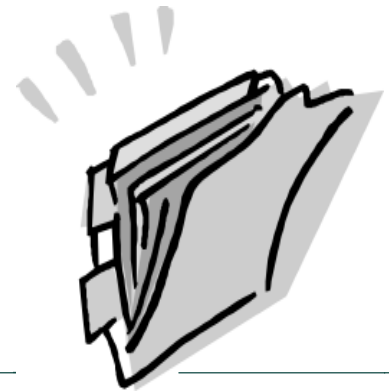
The IDEA gives you the right to look at all of your child's education records. This includes records about his or her identification, evaluation, educational placement, and special education program. You also have the right to ask the school to explain and interpret the records for you. You may ask the school to give you a copy of your child's records. They may charge you a reasonable fee for making a copy (but not for retrieving the records). More details are available online at NICHCY: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/parental-rights/records>

What might be some reasons to request copies of my child's school records?

School records contain valuable information about your child's strengths and areas of need. These records can provide a formal way of communicating between the professionals at your child's school, you, and other professionals who may work with your child. Here are some reasons you might have for requesting a copy of your child's records:

- ◆ Reviewing records lets you be sure that the records are correct and contain all necessary information.
- ◆ When your family is moving to a new school district, records may need to be sent.
- ◆ When you're taking your child for an independent evaluation, copies of past records may be useful.

- ◆ The records may help the staff at other programs your child attends (like camp, tutors, or in-hospital schools) design their activities.
- ◆ Postsecondary programs may need to see copies of your child's records.
- ◆ It's a good idea to have a copy for your home files, especially if your child is finishing school.



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

I am writing to schedule a time to come and review all of my child's records. My son/daughter, (child's name), is in the (___) grade at (name of school), in (teacher's name) class. I will also need copies of some or all of these records.

Please let me know where and when I can come in to see the records. I need these records by (date). You can reach me during the day at (give your phone number).

I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Your name

3 Writing a Follow-up Letter

What do I do if I don't get a response to my first letter?

When you have written a letter or sent an email making a request, you should get a response from the school system, either by telephone or in writing, within a reasonable period of time. In some cases, "reasonable" is defined (for example, local policy may say the school must answer you within 15 working days). In other cases, the timelines are not exact. So, be reasonable in your expectations.

But if you feel too much time has passed (10 working days or so) without receiving a response to your letter, then call and ask if your letter (or email) has been received. If you are sure the school has received your letter (some parents send their letters by certified or registered mail), then ask when you can expect an answer. More than likely, when you call you will talk to a secretary or administrative assistant. Leave a message for the person you wrote to; ask that person to call you back.

If your request still goes unanswered, then you may want to write again. It's useful to enclose a copy of your original request with this letter. Be sure *not* to send your only copy. Remember, you always need to have a copy for your records.



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person To Whom You Originally Wrote
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

I wrote to you on (date) and also called to make sure you had received my letter. I left a message for you to call me back on (date), but since I have not heard from you, I thought it best to write again.

I am writing to request . . .

Enclosed is a copy of my first letter to you.

I would like to hear from you by (give a date, 3-5 working days).
Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Your name

Enclosure

4 Writing a Positive Feedback Letter

Once you've begun to write letters, be sure to write when things are going well, too! If a teacher, therapist, or other staff member has made good things happen for your child, let them and their supervisors know. Everyone likes and needs compliments and encouragement from time to time. Positive feedback is what keeps good schools running well. Just as you want to know "how it's going," so does the school staff.

Good communication, team work, and effective schools take a lot of hard work. There's an old saying that goes, "Things can go wrong all by themselves, but you have to work hard to make things go right." This statement applies doubly to maintaining a successful parent-professional working relationship. Be sure your child's teacher(s), principal, and superintendent also hear from you when things are going right.



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

I am writing to let you know how very pleased I am with the education my son/daughter, (child's name), is receiving at (name of school).

(Child's name) has had great success with (briefly say what is going right). In particular, (name the professionals working with your child and how they have made a difference).

I look forward to (child's name) making continued progress. Thank you for all your efforts, and those of your staff.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: If you write to the school district's Superintendent or Director of Special Education, make sure to copy the people who directly deserve recognition for your child's success—the principal, teachers, and other staff.

5 Requesting an Initial Evaluation for Special Education Services

When would I request an evaluation for special education services?

If your child has been consistently struggling in school, his or her problems may be due to a disability. If the school thinks your child may have a disability, they will contact you to request your written permission to evaluate your child. Under the IDEA, you also have the right to ask the school to evaluate your child. The purpose of the evaluation is to see if he or she has a disability and needs special education services. This evaluation is free of charge.

For more information on evaluation, see NICHCY's publication, *Your Child's Evaluation* or visit our evaluation pages online, at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation/>

Note: If your child has been identified as having a disability by professionals outside the school system, add the sentence below to the end of the first paragraph.

"(Child's name) has been identified as having (name of disability) by (name of professional). Enclosed is a copy of the report(s) I have received that explains (child's name) condition."

If your child has been identified by your doctor or other professionals as having a disability, you will want to include this information in your letter to the school. You should also provide copies of any reports you have received that explain your child's condition.

If you decide to write the school and ask that your child be evaluated, here's an example of what you may want to say.

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Principal or Special Education Administrator
Name of School
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Principal's or Administrator's name),

I am writing to request that my son/daughter, (child's name), be evaluated for special education services. I am worried that (child's name) is not doing well in school and believe he/she may need special services in order to learn. (Child's name) is in the (_) grade at (name of school). (Teacher's name) is his/her teacher.

Specifically, I am worried, because (child's name) does/does not (give a few direct examples of your child's problems at school).

We have tried the following to help (child's name): (If you or the school have done anything extra to help your child, briefly state it here).

I understand that I have to give written permission in order for (child's name) to be evaluated. Before the evaluation begins, I have some questions about the process that I need to have answered (list any questions you may have). I would be happy to talk with you about (child's name). You can send me information or call me during the day at (daytime telephone number). Thank you for your prompt attention to my request.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: your child's principal (if letter is addressed to an administrator)
your child's teacher(s)



Requesting an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at Public Expense

The IDEA gives you the right to have your child evaluated independently. This means you have the right to have your child evaluated by someone other than the staff who work for the school system. The purpose of the evaluation is to see if your child has a disability and, if so, what his or her special needs are. In some cases, you may pay for an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). In other cases, the school system may pay for it. If the school system pays for the IEE or sees that the IEE is done at no cost to you, this is known as an *IEE at public expense*. You can read more about IEEs online at NICHCY: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/parental-rights/iee>

Why would I want to request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at Public Expense?

Sometimes a family may feel that the results of the school’s evaluation do not accurately describe their child. They may want additional academic tests or medical exams. Or they may be interested in evaluations in skill areas the school staff did not

test. Parents can choose to have their child tested outside the school system, for these or other reasons.

However, if you want *the school to pay* for the IEE, you will need to make your request BEFORE any independent testing is done. Some reasons you may want to request an independent evaluation include:

- ◆ You believe the original evaluation was incorrect or incomplete and additional tests are needed.
- ◆ The original evaluation was not done in your child’s native language.
- ◆ The evaluation was not done with the needed accommodations (for example, in Braille or administered by someone who knows sign language).

The school system may agree to your request and pay for the IEE. On the other hand, the school system may deny your request and ask for a hearing to show that its own evaluation was appropriate. You will have the chance at this hearing to state your reasons why the school system should be required to pay for the IEE.

An impartial third person (called a hearing officer) listens to and reviews the evidence. This individual then decides if the school system must pay for an independent evaluation. If the hearing officer decides in favor of the school system, you may still obtain an independent evaluation, but you must pay for it.

The results of the IEE must be considered by the school in any decision made regarding your child’s free appropriate public education.

<p>Today’s Date (include month, day, and year)</p> <p>Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing Title Street Address City, State, Zip Code</p> <p>Dear (name),</p> <p>My son/daughter, (child’s name), is in the (_) grade at (name of school), in (teacher’s name) class. He/She was evaluated for special education services in (month/year). I am writing to request an Independent Educational Evaluation at public expense, for the following reasons: (BRIEFLY list your reason(s). Be very specific. For example,)</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">“I disagree with the evaluation results because . . .”</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">“The evaluation should have included . . .”</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">“Evaluation should have been done in the area of . . .”</p> <p>I would like this Independent Educational Evaluation to be done as quickly as possible so that we can fully address (child’s name) needs. Please respond as soon as possible and send me copies of the school’s guidelines for this. My daytime telephone number is (give your phone number). Thank you.</p> <p>Sincerely, Your name</p> <p>cc: your child’s principal your child’s teacher</p>	<p>Your Name Street Address City, State, Zip Code Daytime telephone number</p>
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7 Requesting a Meeting to Review the Individualized Education Program (IEP)

If your child is receiving special education services, he or she must have a written plan known as an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP lists, among other things, annual goals for your child and the special education services that he or she will receive. You are a member of the team that writes your child's IEP. As an IEP team member, you can ask that your child's IEP be reviewed and revised, if needed. This part of the *Parent's Guide* looks at writing a letter to request that your child's IEP be reviewed.



Why might I ask for a review of my child's IEP?

Some reasons for requesting an IEP review include:

- ◆ Your child has met one, or several, of the goals written in the IEP.
- ◆ Your child does not seem to be making enough progress toward one, or several, of the goals written in IEP.
- ◆ You feel your child needs more services or other services in order to make progress.
- ◆ You feel that your child no longer needs a service he or she is currently receiving.
- ◆ Your child has experienced a major change, such as illness, injury, or surgery.

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Your Child's Special Education Teacher
Name of School
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Teacher's name),

I am writing to request an IEP review meeting. I would like to discuss making some changes in (child's name)'s IEP. I am concerned about (state your reasons, but don't go into detail about the specific changes you want to make—save those for the meeting).

I would also like to have (names of specialists or other staff) attend. I think his/her/their ideas about the changes we may need to make will be valuable.

I can arrange to meet with you and the other members of the IEP team on (days) between (give a range of time, such as between 2:00 and 4:00). Please let me know what time would be best for you.

I look forward to hearing from you soon. My daytime telephone number is (give your phone number). Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: specialists or other staff



Requesting a Change of Placement

Placement means where your child's IEP is carried out. Depending on your child's needs, his or her placement may be in the general education classroom, in a special education classroom, in a special school, in your home, in a hospital or institution, or in another setting. IDEA strongly prefers placement in the general education classroom, but does not mandate it.

Placement is based on the IEP. Therefore, when you request a change in placement, you are actually requesting an IEP review to discuss your child's needs and where those needs are met.

Why might I ask for a change in my child's placement?

You might want to request a change in your child's placement if you feel that your child's needs are not being met appropriately. For example, you may become concerned about your child's placement after reviewing your child's progress reports; reviewing the results of any state, district-wide, or alternate assessments your child has been given; talking with your child's teacher or other service providers; or talking with your child.

Placement concerns might also include:

- ◆ changes in your child's needs;
- ◆ current class size is too large or too small;
- ◆ current class is too academic or not academic enough;

- ◆ the placement does not meet your child's social or emotional needs;
- ◆ the building is too difficult for your child to get around; or
- ◆ any other reason that this class placement is not working out successfully.

More information about placement, especially the principles of "least restrictive environment," is available online at NICHCY: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/placement/>



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Principal or Special Education Administrator
Name of School
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Principal's or Administrator's name),

I am writing to request a meeting to discuss a change in placement for my son/daughter, (child's name). He/she is currently in the (___) grade in (teacher's name) class. I feel he/she needs to be in (name of alternative, if you know; otherwise describe the type of placement you feel is more appropriate for your child, such as your neighborhood school, a center-based program, general education class, or special class).

I am most concerned about (keep this paragraph brief and mention your child's unmet needs, not problems with individual people).

I would also like to have (name of teacher(s) and/or any specialists you would like from the current and/or requested placement) attend this meeting.

I can arrange to meet with the rest of the IEP team on (days) between (give a range of time, such as between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.). Please let me know what time would be best.

I look forward to hearing from you soon. My daytime telephone number is (give your phone number). Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: your child's principal (if letter is addressed to an administrator)
your child's teacher(s)
specialists or other staff



Informing the School that You Intend to Enroll Your Child in a Private School at Public Expense

What do I do if I think my child's placement should be in a private school?

In some cases, the most appropriate placement for a child is in a private school. When this placement decision is made by the IEP team or placement group in the public school, the public school pays the cost of the private school. Sometimes a parent may feel that a recommended public school placement is not appropriate for his or her child. The parent may reject that placement and decide to enroll his or her child in a private school. If



you find yourself facing this decision *and* you want the public school to reimburse you for the cost of the private school, there are several things you need to know.

1. A court or a hearing officer may require the school district to reimburse you if the court or hearing officer decides that:

(a) the public school did not make FAPE available in a timely manner prior to your child's enrollment in the private school, and

(b) the private placement is appropriate.

2. Your request for reimbursement may be reduced or denied if, before enrolling your child in the private school:

(a) at the most recent IEP meeting, you did not inform the school that you were rejecting the proposed placement (including stating your concerns) and intended to enroll your child in a private school at public expense, or

(b) at least 10 business days prior to removing your child from the public school, you did not give the school written notice.

To the left is an example of a letter you might send if you decide to enroll your child in a private school and want the public school to pay for it.

Once you have sent this letter to the school, you will also need to make a request for a due process hearing so that a hearing officer can decide whether or not the public school must reimburse you for the costs of the private school. See the section on due process under Letter #12.

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Principal or Administrator
Name of School
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (Principal's or Administrator's name),

My son/daughter, (child's name), is a special education student in the (_) grade in (name of teacher)'s class at (name of school). Recently, I attended a meeting to determine (child's name)'s school placement. I am writing to inform you that I reject the proposed placement for (child's name), and intend to enroll him/her in a private school at public expense. At the most recent IEP meeting, held on (date), I informed the other team members of my decision.

The reasons for my decision are as follows: (Keep this section brief, list specifics for why you believe the public school placement is not appropriate for your child).

(Child's name) will be attending (name of private school), effective (date).

Should you wish to discuss this matter further, I can be reached at (give your phone number). Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Your name

10 Requesting Prior Written Notice

What is prior written notice, and why would I want it?

There are certain times when the school must put in writing its decisions about your child's education and the reasons for those decisions. This written communication is called *prior written notice*. You have the right to receive prior written notice whenever the school wants to (or refuses to):

- ◆ evaluate your child,
- ◆ change your child's disability identification,
- ◆ change your child's educational placement, or
- ◆ change the way in which your child is provided with FAPE.

The school system is supposed to automatically provide you with prior written notice in any of these events. In practice, though, sometimes the school may tell you its decision over the telephone, in a meeting, or in a one-on-one conversation. If you want the notification in writing, you may ask the school system to provide it. And it is best that you put your request in writing.

For example, you may have asked for an IEE at public expense. The school system may tell you on the phone that it has denied your request. You may ask for prior written notice of this denial. The school must then put its decision in writing and explain the reasons for the decision. This information can be helpful if you pursue the IEE through a due process hearing. You will then have in writing the school system's reasons for denying the IEE.



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

At our meeting (or) during our phone conversation on (date), we discussed my child's (evaluation, eligibility, placement, IEP, services, etc.). I requested (_____). . . and was denied (or) I was told the school intends to (_____). . . but I have never received any information about this decision in writing. In accordance with the IDEA regulations, I am requesting prior written notice regarding (be very specific about the issue/decision you want the school to respond to. Bullet or number the items.)

According to the IDEA, at 34 CRF §300.503, prior written notice must include the following:

1. A description of what the school is proposing or refusing to do;
2. An explanation of why the school proposes or refuses this action;
3. A description of any other options the school considered and the reasons why those options were rejected;
4. A description of each evaluation procedure, test, record, or report the school used as a basis for this decision;
5. A description of any other relevant factors that went into this decision;
6. Information on how I can obtain a copy of procedural safeguards available to me under the law and a full explanation of the safeguards, and
7. Information on sources I can contact for help in understanding IDEA's regulations.

I look forward to receiving a detailed response to my request as soon as possible. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: the principal, supervisor, or special education administrator
other members of the meeting

11 Requesting Mediation

When would I make a request for mediation?

Anytime you have a serious disagreement with the school and you feel it isn't getting resolved, you may request mediation. In mediation, you and school personnel sit down with an impartial third person (called a mediator), talk openly about the areas where you disagree, and try to reach an agreement. Mediation is voluntary, so *both parties must agree to meet with a mediator.*

There are benefits to mediation, both for you and for the school. One of the chief benefits is that mediation allows you and the school to state your concerns and work together to reach a solution that focuses on the needs of the student and is acceptable to both of you.

For more information on mediation, visit CADRE, the Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education, at: www.directionservice.org/cadre

NICHCY also offers detailed information about mediation under IDEA, beginning at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/mediation/>



Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

My son/daughter, (child's name), currently attends (name of school) and is in the (___) grade in (teacher's name) class. I am writing to inform you that the school and I are in disagreement concerning (BRIEFLY state what the disagreement is about). We have been unsuccessful in resolving this dispute, and I am requesting mediation so that we may resolve our differences.

I would like the mediation to be done as soon as possible. Please let me know when this can be arranged and send me a copy of the school's guidelines on mediation. My daytime telephone number is (give your phone number). Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Your name

cc: your child's principal
your child's teacher

12 Requesting a Due Process Hearing

You've read about due process in other places in this *Parent's Guide*. Due process is one approach that parents and schools can use to resolve disagreements. Basically, in a due process hearing, you and the school present evidence before an impartial third person called a hearing officer. The hearing officer then decides how to resolve the problem.

You have the right to request a due process hearing on any matter related to:

- ◆ your child's identification as a "child with a disability,"
- ◆ his or her evaluation,
- ◆ his or her educational placement, and
- ◆ the special education and related services that the school provides to your child.

When would I request a due process hearing?

Some reasons why a parent might file for due process include:

- ◆ The school refuses to evaluate your child.
- ◆ You disagree with the eligibility decision.
- ◆ You disagree with the services or goals in the IEP.
- ◆ The school refuses to provide a related service, modification, or supplementary aid you think your child needs.
- ◆ You disagree with the placement decision.

Generally speaking, when the family and school disagree, it is important for both sides to first discuss their concerns and try to reach a compromise. Remember, the goal is to provide an appropriate education for your child. There are many options when deciding what an appropriate education is, and some trial and error may be necessary to develop a successful program for your child.

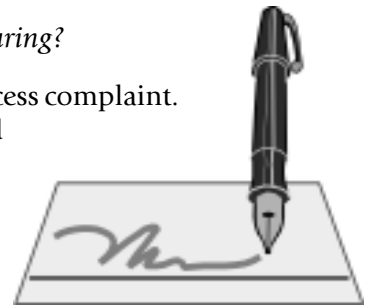
However, if you and the school have fully communicated, understand each other's positions, tried such strategies as IEP meetings and/or mediation, and you still disagree, you may want to request a due process hearing. A due process hearing is a formal proceeding. As was said above, you and the school system share your information and concerns in front of a qualified, impartial hearing officer. The school system will probably be represented by an attorney. While parents are not required to have an attorney, you are strongly encouraged to have one. Your state's PTI center will have information on special education attorneys in your area. The school system must also tell you about any free or low-cost legal (and other relevant) services available in the area if you request a due process hearing or if you simply request this information.

In the due process hearing, the hearing officer will listen to both you and the school system. The hearing officer will then make a decision about how to resolve the conflict, based upon the evidence and the requirements of law.

How do I request a due process hearing?

The first step is to file a due process complaint. This complaint must be signed and must include specific information:

- ◆ the name of your child;
- ◆ the address of your child's residence;
- ◆ the name of your child's school;
- ◆ a description of the problem, including facts relating to the problem; and
- ◆ how you would resolve the problem, to the extent that a solution is known and available to you as parents.



Information in the complaint must be kept confidential. Each state is required to have a model form to help parents write a due process complaint. You are not required to use the model form. However, if you want, you should be able to get a copy of this model from your school system or State Education Agency.

To whom do I send the complaint?

Your school district must have procedures in place so that you can file your complaint. You'll need to ask what those are—the Director of Special Education in your school or district will know. This will include the person or office with whom you need to file your complaint. IDEA also requires that you provide a copy of your

complaint to the other party (in this case, the school system) and to the State Education Agency.

What happens next?

If your complaint includes the required information and is deemed “sufficient,” quite a lot happens next! First, within 10 days of receiving your complaint, the other party (i.e., the school system) will send you a response that specifically addresses the issues raised in your complaint. IDEA also requires that the school system convene a **resolution meeting** within 15 days of receiving notice that you have filed a due process complaint. The purpose of the resolution meeting is for you as parents to discuss your due process complaint and the facts that form the basis of that complaint, so that the school system has the opportunity to resolve the dispute without holding a due process hearing.

There’s a lot to know about due process complaints, resolution meetings, and due process hearings, far too much to explain it all here. We refer you to the detailed information available on our website, beginning at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/dueprocess/>



Today’s Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

I am writing to request a due process hearing on behalf of my child, (child’s name), whose address is (give your child’s address, even if it is the same as your own). (Child’s name) attends (name of school).

I have met with school personnel in an effort to resolve our differences concerning my son’s/daughter’s (IEP, placement, testing, or . . .) and have been unable to do so. The nature of our disagreement is as follows:

- Explain the problem with BRIEF statements of fact.
- Consider listing the facts with bullets or numbers.
- An acceptable resolution of the problem would include . . . (To the extent that you know how you want the disagreement to be resolved, state these facts here, again bulleting or numbering the items if possible.)

Please advise me as soon as possible as to the date and time of this hearing so that I can make the necessary arrangements. My daytime telephone number is (give your phone number).

I also request that this hearing be (open/closed) to persons other than those directly involved. (Child’s name) will/will not attend the hearing. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: your child’s principal
your advocate/attorney

13 Filing a Complaint with the State Education Agency

What's a State complaint, and why would I file one?

You've read about two means of resolving conflicts with the school system: mediation and due process. A third means is filing a complaint with the State Education Agency (SEA). Under IDEA, you have the right to file a complaint when you believe that the state or school district has violated a requirement of the IDEA. The SEA must resolve your complaint within 60 calendar days (not business days) from the day they receive it, unless there are exceptional circumstances with respect to the complaint. The complaint process can be effective in resolving conflicts with the school system and is less costly and intimidating than a due process hearing.

Detailed information about the State complaint procedure is available at NICHCY, beginning at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/statecomplaint/>

It's important, however, to know what your State's policies are. Contact your SEA to find out the details of its requirements.

Whenever you file a State complaint (or seek mediation or due process), it is a good idea as well to seek advice from the Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) or the Protection and Advocacy Agency (P&A) in your state. These organizations are listed on NICHCY's *State Resource Sheet* for your state, available at: <http://www.nichcy.org/families-community/states/>

You can file a State complaint with the SEA about any of the matters for which you might otherwise file a request for a due process hearing, as well as for any other reason you feel that the school system has violated the IDEA. However, be aware that, if you write a complaint on an issue that is also part of a current due process hearing, the SEA will not investigate this issue. The due process hearing takes precedence over the State complaint process. The SEA will

only investigate those issues in your State complaint that are not part of your due process hearing.

Some examples of issues you might write a State complaint about include:

- ◆ Your child is denied the opportunity to attend or participate in school-sponsored events, such as field trips or after school activities.
- ◆ Your child has a shorter school day, because the special education students arrive later or are dismissed from school earlier than the general education students are.
- ◆ You use mediation to resolve a disagreement with the school, but the school fails to implement the signed agreement.
- ◆ The school fails to give you appropriate prior written notice. Or,
- ◆ You have a decision from a hearing officer that the school district is not implementing.

How do I file a complaint with the State Education Agency?

Your state's policies for filing a State complaint should be included in its IDEA regulations. Call your local special education office or the SEA if you need more information about the policies. Also ask for the name and address of the person to whom you should write your letter. Your complaint must be signed. Among other things, it must also contain:



- ◆ a statement that a public agency (for example, your school system) has violated a requirement of Part B of the IDEA or its regulations, and
- ◆ the facts on which you base this statement.

The letter on the next page is an example of how you might write this complaint. Note that it is important to state what requirement of the law has been violated. The PTI or P&A in your state can help you identify the specific sections of IDEA to list in your complaint.

Sample Letter 13: Filing a Complaint with the State Education Agency

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Daytime telephone number

Name of Person to Whom You Are Writing
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (name),

I am writing to file a complaint on behalf of my son/daughter, (child's name), regarding his/her education in the (name of school district). The nature of my complaint is as follows:

- Explain the problem with BRIEF statements of fact.
- Consider listing the facts that support your complaint with bullets or numbers.

For the above reasons, I believe the school district is in violation of certain requirements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, specifically: (list the requirements of IDEA you feel the school system has violated. For example,

"The school system has violated the following requirements of the IDEA:

- to consider whether my child needs assistive technology services or devices, as required by Section 300.324(a)(2)(v);
- to include in my child's IEP a statement of the special education, related services and supplementary aids and services, including assistive technology, that he/she needs as required by Section 300.320(a)(4)."

Enclosed are copies of relevant documents and correspondence I have sent to and received from the school district concerning this matter. These documents are (List the documents you have enclosed, giving the date sent, by whom, to whom, and the issue discussed.)

Please provide me with copies of any information you obtain in the process of investigating my complaint. If you need further information or clarification on my complaint, I can be reached at (give your phone number). Thank you.

Sincerely,

Your name

cc: school district special education director
your child's principal
your advocate/attorney

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