UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY SUPPORTS

IDEA, Section 504 & the ADA

A parent-friendly guide to school supports and planning for life after high school

The big picture: These three laws help protect people with disabilities, but they work in different ways. IDEA can provide specially designed instruction and related services. Section 504 and the ADA focus on equal access and protection from disability discrimination.

	IDEA Individual Education Plan (K–12 special education)	Section 504 (K–12 and college)	ADA (public life, college & work settings)
Main purpose	Helps eligible students receive an appropriate public education, including special education and related services when needed.	Protects eligible students from disability discrimination and helps remove barriers at school or college.	Protects people with disabilities from discrimination in many settings, including employment, public services, and colleges.
Who may qualify?	A student must meet IDEA eligibility requirements and need special education because of the disability.	A student may qualify when a physical or mental impairment substantially limits one or more major life activities, as defined by law.	A person must meet the ADA's definition of disability for the protections that apply to the situation.
What support can look like	Specially designed instruction, related services when needed, accommodations, and an Individualized Education Program (IEP).	Reasonable accommodations and related aids or services needed to provide equal access; usually documented in a 504 plan in K–12.	Reasonable accommodations or changes that provide equal access, unless the law allows an exception.
Who helps arrange support?	The school and the IEP team, including the parent/guardian and student when appropriate.	In K–12, the school and Section 504 team. In college, the student usually contacts the disability services office.	In college, the student usually works with the disability services office. At work, the employee or applicant requests accommodations from the employer.
Evaluations and paperwork	The school evaluates the student at no cost to the family. Parent consent is required for an initial evaluation and other steps as required by law.	In K–12, the school evaluates at no cost when an evaluation is needed. In college, students generally provide documentation if requested under the college's process.	The person may need to provide information showing a disability and explaining the accommodation need, depending on the setting.
Written plan	An IEP describes the student's learning needs, goals, services, supports, and how progress will be measured.	A K–12 504 plan typically lists accommodations and supports that provide access to learning and school activities.	There is not one universal ADA plan. Accommodations are worked out with the college, employer, or other covered organization.
Learning setting	The team decides the setting and supports based on the student's needs. Students must be educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.	Students are generally educated in the regular classroom with supports that provide equal access, when appropriate.	Colleges and workplaces provide access and reasonable accommodations; the person is responsible for requesting support through the applicable process.
Family and student role	Parents are important members of the IEP team and have specific rights. Student participation and transition planning become increasingly important as the student gets older.	Parents are involved in K–12 planning. In college, the student generally takes the lead and controls sharing their education information, subject to applicable law.	The individual generally takes the lead in identifying needs and requesting accommodations.

A few important reminders

- ☐ An IEP, a Section 504 plan, and ADA accommodations are not interchangeable. Eligibility and available supports depend on the law and setting.
- ☐ Having a disability does not automatically mean a student qualifies for IDEA special education or every accommodation under Section 504 or the ADA.
- ☐ College is different from K–12: families should help students prepare to take the lead in requesting accommodations. College accommodations are not automatically carried over from high school.
- ☐ This handout is an overview, not legal advice. Ask your school team or the college/workplace disability services contact about the rules that apply to your situation.

Source and further information: Adapted in plain language from the Utah State Board of Education's "Comparison of IDEA, Section 504, and ADA." Read the original resource at https://schools.utah.gov/studentservices/_studentservicesprograms/_studentandfamilyrights/_section504docs/_parentguardianstudent/TransitionComparisonIDEA.pdf