**Special Education Parent Handbook**

**Okeechobee County School District**

**700 S.W. Second Avenue**

**Okeechobee, Florida 34974**





**Children are at the Heart of Everything We Do**

**Welcome**

The Okeechobee County School District Exceptional Student Education Department is committed to providing a quality educational experience based upon the individual needs of each child. Exceptional student education provides specialized instruction for students to minimize the impact of their disability through a continuum of services, ranging from services provided in the general education classroom to fully contained classroom settings. In addition to special education teachers, students with disabilities may receive support from paraprofessional, nurses, school psychologists, social workers, speech language and occupational therapists. The goal of the exceptional student education department is to provide services that will allow students with disabilities to acquire the skills to pursue independent living and post-secondary success.

This handbook has been created to help you understand more about the education language and acronyms used in the special education process. Often, during meetings, many of these acronyms are used, and it is assumed that everyone is familiar with the meanings. In order to help with any confusion, we have included in this booklet frequently used terms and definitions, as well as an acronym glossary.

We hope this book will empower you with the information and support your need to help your child.

***LAWS GOVERNING SPECIAL EDUCATION***

**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improved Act (IDEA)**

IDEA governs how the special education providers provide services to students with disabilities. IDEA is the most comprehensive federal law regarding special education. According to this law, students with disabilities have a number of basic rights. The most significant rights are:

**A Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)**

Okeechobee County School District is responsible for providing a free and appropriate education to all students with disabilities. These services are available on the child’s third (3rd) birthday and may continue through age 21.

**Educational Services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

Least restrictive environment (LRE) means that your child will be educated with students without disabilities to the maximum possible, while still meeting the student’s educational needs.

**Instructional and Support Services and Supplementary Aids**

These services include, but are not limited to physical therapy, mental health, speech therapy, transportation and adaptive equipment, and are guided by your child’s individual needs.

**Assessment Procedures**

Educational assessment (or evaluation) is conducted to identify your child’s learning needs and to determine whether your child requires special education and, if so, what type of special education and related services. Assessments must be conducted before your child can receive special education services. A re-evaluation to determine eligibility must occur at least every three years following your child’s placement. Parents and/or teachers may request assessment at more frequent intervals.

**An Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Plan for your child**

Further details about your rights in an IEP are included in this handbook.

**Due Process**

Due Process assures you the right to be involved in educational decisions about your child including an appeal process to challenge decision with which you may disagree.

**The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)**

FERPA provides privacy safeguards to all parents, legal guardians and students. It forbids the release of a student’s records or personally identifiable information to unauthorized persons, but does not bar the disclosure of “directory information.”

IDEA incorporates the provisions of FERPA. In addition to the protections offered by FERPA, IDEA prohibits Okeechobee County School District from releasing information to unauthorized persons regarding your child’s disability, or the fact that your child is disabled, without your consent. As a special education agency, the additional confidentiality requirements of IDEA restrict us from acting upon the directory information provision of FERPA if any release of student information could be construed as identifying a student with an educational disability. Therefore the Exceptional student education department will deny requests for any student information regarding your child without your authorization.

Both FERPA and IDEA permit the release of education information to public school districts in which your child is enrolled or intends to enroll without your consent. The receiving school district is bound by the same confidentiality requirements under these laws. For students receiving special education services in a local school district building, the release of directory information by the local district can be prohibited through notification to that district.

**The American with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

Section 504 is a civil rights act that protects the civil and constitutional rights of persons with disabilities. It applies to any agency receiving federal funds. While IDEA lists specific categories of disability, Section 504 defines a disability as a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Section 504 provides for a free, appropriate education in the least-restrictive environment, reasonable accommodations, and a written plan describing placement and services. Section 504 also applies to college students, to the workplace to physical access to public buildings. This act is enforced by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR).

***Key Components of the Special Education Process***

**How Does a Preschool Student Qualify for Special Education Services?** There are several steps to be completed and criteria to be met before a student begins to receive services.

**Preschool Child Find**

For children birth to 3 years of age Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System (FDLRS) in coordination with the school district, locates children who are potentially eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Their website is fdlrs.org/child-find.

Okeechobee County School District has professionals who are trained to evaluate students age 3 through 6, in a variety of areas, including cognitive functioning, physical functioning, hearing and vision, speech and language and social and emotional development. Evaluations are conducted by the Preschool Child Find team at no cost to parents. Once the child find evaluation team, which includes the parents, has gathered sufficient information used to determine a child’s eligibility for early intervention or preschool special education services, an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP – birth to three years of age) or an Individualized Education Program (IEP – three to five years of age) is developed and services can begin.

Children under the age of six may be referred at any time for an eligibility determination for early intervention (ages birth through three) or preschool special education services (ages three through five). Okeechobee County School District provides individualized preschool special education services for eligible children, three to five years of age.

**Special Education Services**

The Preschool Child Find process includes formal assessment for the identification of a disability. An Individualized Educational Program (IEP) Team will be formed to guide the process and may determine that your child needs special education and related services. Special education is specialized instruction for your child to minimize the impact of his/her disability through a continuum of services, ranging from services provided in the general education classroom to fully contained classroom settings.

**Specific Learning Disability (SLD)**

Educational concerns relevant to your child may be identified in the classroom and from parents.

**Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)**

When an educational concern has been identified, your child’s general education teacher, in consultation with the MTSS team, that may include a counselor, teachers, psychologist, etc., will identify and implement a variety of intervention strategies with your child. You would be notified before the implementation of these strategies. The emphasis throughout the entire process is to meet the educational, social, emotional needs of your child in a general education setting and to gather a body of evidence documenting the multi-tiered system of support. After gathering a body of evidence the MTSS team will determine whether the intervention strategies have successfully addressed the concern(s). After thorough review and ongoing communication with you, the team will make a recommendation for the student to continue in the general education setting with strategies in place for success or the need for further evaluation by a special education team.

**Completion of the Body of Evidence**

The body of evidence should document concerns and the basis for those concerns. Developmental history and adaptive behavioral information from you may be included, as well as medical diagnoses or educational testing results from other sources.

**Review by the IEP Team**

The IEP Team determines whether an evaluation is warranted by reviewing the referral body of evidence for completeness and appropriateness. Before a decision can be made, the IEP Team reviews the body of evidence to determine whether:

* The MTSS team has identified specific concerns that have an adverse educational impact.
* There is a suspicion of an educational disability.
* The severity of that disability might warrant special education and/or related services.

**Referral to the IEP Team**

If the IEP Team determines that the child should be referred for an evaluation, a representative of the IEP Team will notify you in writing of the decision. You also will receive:

* A written explanation of the procedural safeguards and parent rights
* An explanation of the proposed actions(s)

**Review of Existing Body of Evidence**

If it is determined that an evaluation is warranted an evaluation plan is developed through

A review of the existing body of evidence to identify what additional information is required in order to identify:

* Whether your child is eligible for services through identification as a child with an educational diagnosis based state criteria
* Your child’s “Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance”(PLAAFP) based on how the child is currently performing in school
* Whether that disability interferes with your child’s educational performance
* Whether your child needs special education and related services
* Whether, in the case of a reevaluation, any adaptations or modifications are needed to enable your child to meet Individualized Education Program (IEP) annual goals and participate, as appropriate, in the general education curriculum.

**Notice and Consent for Evaluation**

Notice of Action/Consent to Evaluate must be obtained from you prior to conducting any assessments. This consent includes:

* A description of the action proposed
* An explanation of why the action is being taken
* A description of the options considered and why they were rejected
* A description of each evaluation procedure, test, record, or report used as a basis for the action
* A description of any relevant factors considered (if there were “none” it must so state)
* Information about how to obtain a copy of Procedural safeguards and who to contact for interpretive information.

**Completion of Evaluation**

During the 60 days after consent to evaluate has been obtained, assessments in areas identified as concerns are completed by the school team that may consist of psychologists, teachers and other related services providers.

**Eligibility Conference**

At the eligibility conference, each evaluator reports his/her assessment results, and a determination is made concerning whether or not your child is eligible for special education services according to state criteria. The team will also discuss issues related to access to the general education curriculum

**Development of an Individualized Education Program**

*What is an IEP?*

An IEP – or Individualized Education Program – is a term used to describe the official documentation of special education services that will be provided for your child. Here are some key points to help you become more familiar with an IEP.

*The IEP includes:*

* A meeting with you, your child when appropriate, and school personnel jointly to make decisions about an educational program.
* A written record of the decisions reached at the meeting for your child to receive special education and related services.
* A Prior Written Notice after the IEP meeting but prior to beginning the services.

*The IEP has a number of purposes and functions:*

The IEP meeting serves as a communication opportunity between you and educators and enables us, as equal participants, to jointly decide what your child’s needs are, what services will be provided to meet those needs, and what the anticipated outcomes may be.

The IEP process provides an opportunity for resolving any differences between you and the school concerning the special education needs of your child; first through the IEP meeting, and second, if necessary, through the procedural protections that are available to you.

The IEP sets forth in writing a commitment to provide services and resources necessary to enable your child to receive needed special education services.

*The IEP is not:*

* A daily lesson plan, but it does cover an entire year.
* An evaluation report (an evaluation report describes your child’s needs and the information from an evaluation report is used to help write the IEP).
* A comprehensive curriculum (it relates to special considerations within your child’s overall education).
* Timeless (as your child grows and learns, the IEP will need to reflect these changes).

*Who’s on the IEP team?*

Those who will participate in the meeting should include:

* You as the parent
* At least one regular education teacher of your child
* At least on special education teacher
* A representative of the district who is knowledgeable about resources and curriculum of the district (he/she can be the special education teacher)
* An individual to interpret instructional implications of evaluation results
* Other individuals who have knowledge or expertise regarding our child, at the discretion of you or Okeechobee County School District.
* Your child, if appropriate (required at age of 14 and older)
* During transition planning, representatives of other agencies needed to plan for child’s future (a helpful transition guide is provided by the Florida Department of Education (FDE) at the following website). https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/postsecondary-transition-guide-august-2020.pdf

*Components of an IEP*

The IEP answers the following questions:

* Are there any health concerns about your child?
* What does your child know and do well?
* What are this year’s annual goals and objectives?
* What services will be provided?
* How will services be provided?

**Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)**

This section includes the following information:

* How your child’s disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum; or for preschool children, participation in age-appropriate activities.
* Your child’s strengths, as noted by school staff, the parent and the child (if present); for students with transition plans, this information will relate to the child’s post-secondary goals.
* Your concerns for enhancing the education of your child; for students with transition plans, this area will include your expectations for your child after he or she leaves high school
* Changes in current functioning of your child since the initial or prior IEP (for students with transition plans, consider how changes in the child’s current functioning will impact the child’s ability to reach his or her post-secondary goals)
* A summary of the most recent evaluation or re-evaluation results
* A summary of the results of your child’s performance on any general state and district-wide assessments.

**Special Considerations Federal and State Requirements**

The IEP development process contains specific considerations that are both state and federal requirements. These items need to be addressed within the IEP document and must be considered annually. They are:

* Needs of students who are blind or visually impaired
* Needs of students who are deaf or hearing impaired
* Needs of students who exhibit behaviors that impede learning or the learning of others
* Needs of students with limited English proficiency
* Needs of students with communication difficulties
* Student’s need for assistive technology devices and/or services
* Whether the student is eligible for Extended School Year (ESY)
* Whether post-secondary transition services for students 14 and older are required
* Whether notification of the Transfer of Rights must be given (notice must be given one year before the students 18th birthday informing him or her of the rights under IDEA that will transfer to the student upon reaching the age of majority)
* Whether state assessments are administered for the student’s age or grade level
* Whether district-wide assessments are administered for the student’s age or grade level.

**IEP Goal(s) with Objectives/Benchmarks**

Annual goals are the targets toward which your child’s special education program is directed. They describe what he or she can be expected accomplish within an academic year. They are written to increase your child’s successful participation in the regular education curriculum, include appropriate activities and allow for inclusion in the regular education environment to the maximum extent appropriate. A well-written goal is meaningful, measurable, able to be monitored, useful in making decisions, and aligned with Grade Level Expectations (GLE)

**Reporting Progress**

The IEP states how often progress will be reported parents.

**Services Summary**

This outlines the details of anything that is needed fulfill the IEP goals. It includes the minutes, frequency and location of special education services, as well as the beginning and ending dates of services.

Also includes information about any related services, supplementary aids, program modifications and accommodations that are required to accomplish the IEP goals. The Services Summary also includes any supports school personnel may need to implement the IEP.

**Placement Options**

Following the completion of your child’s IEP, the IEP team will make a placement recommendation. The placement decision is based on your child’s needs and takes several factors into consideration, including your child’s placement in the **least restrictive environment (LRE).**

*Least Restrictive Environment*

Your child will be educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, with children without disabilities. The IEP team must first consider if your child can remain in the regular education classroom and achieve the IEP goals with the help of supplementary aids and services. If the team agrees this cannot be achieved satisfactorily, the team then must decide the route that will allow your child opportunities to be integrated with peers without disabilities as close to his or her home school as possible.

*Considerations for removing a child from a regular education classroom*

* The nature or severity of your child’s disability is such that his or her education in the regular education class, with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily.
* Behavior by your child that is so disruptive in the regular education classroom that the education of the other students is significantly impaired.

*Removal from regular education must be based on the following factors*

* The nature and severity of the disability (cannot be the only factor)
* The diverse learning styles that would require your child to be educated in a setting other than the regular education classroom
* The need for specially designed materials, supplies or equipment that would prohibit access to the curriculum and goals of the regular education class
* Significant modifications to the regular education curriculum
* The extent to which your child is distractible
* The inability of your child to interact appropriately with other students
* Any potential harmful effect on your child or on the quality of services that your child needs
* Any significant disruptions that would occur in the regular education classroom that would have a negative effect on the education of the other students
* The degree to which your child would not benefit from placement in the regular education class.

**What is a re-evaluation:**

A re-evaluation is required every three years to determine if your child continues to require special education services. This re-evaluation may be completed with or without additional testing. The IEP team, of which you are a part, must review existing data to identify if any additional testing is needed to confirm eligibility for special education.

Formal testing is not required if there is enough information to confirm eligibility of your child for services and meet his/her educational needs. If additional testing is necessary, based on the review of existing data, your consent must be obtained.

No testing at the re-evaluation is required to terminate your child’s services; however, the district must honor your request for formal assessment if all services are terminated. If you request testing at a re-evaluation and the district is not terminating all services for your child, the IEP team can deny your request for additional testing. The team will issue a Prior Written Notice informing you of this decision. You may then exercise your due process rights.

When testing is completed, you will be invited to a conference to discuss the assessment result.

**What to Bring Checklist to the IEP Meeting**

* Goals you have for the coming year – put your child’s needs and preferences at the center of any discussion
* Examples of strategies and interventions that have and have not worked
* Last year’s IEP
* Positive mindset and willingness to try new things
* Realization that not everyone may agree – try not to be judgmental or defensive
* Commitment to collaboration – acknowledge and respect each team member.

**Tips**

After the IEP meeting, here are a few things you can do to help ensure your child’s success throughout the year.

* Maintain close contact with your child’s teacher. Two-way communication is a key to making any program work.
* Ask for suggestions on how you can continue to practice and reinforce what is going on in school
* Continue to keep good records
* During the year, keep a list of anything you want to consider for your child’s next IEP
* If you think teachers or other team members are doing a good job, tell them. Let them know when they have done something you appreciate.
* If you have discovered hints that help your child learn, share them. Offer to help teachers and others adapt materials or programs.
* Remember that other people such as school bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers and secretaries may help your child in informal ways.
* Get involved in your child’s school. The more you are involved and the more people see you, the better you will get to know each other.
* Go over your child’s IEP every few months. Are the services written in the IEP being provided? Are you satisfied? Is your child happy? If there appears to be a problem, ask for a meeting of all the people involved. If you feel it is necessary, ask for a team meeting to change the IEP. You may do this at any time.
* Talk with your child’s teacher if you have any questions or if there are any problems.
* Do not get personal. Mention the problem and not the person. For example “My child has not received speech and language services for three weeks.
* “My child has not received the assistive technology evaluation we agreed upon.”
* Focus on your child’s needs for services, appropriate goals and objectives, placement, etc.
* Participate in training sessions or workshops offered by the school district or other community agencies.

**GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS**

ADA Americans with Disability Act

ADD Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AN Affective Needs

APE Adapted Physical Education

ASL American Sign Language

ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder

AYP Adequate Yearly Progress

BIP Behavior Intervention Plan

CELA Colorado English Language Assessment

CIMP Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process

DB Deaf Blindness

DD Developmental Delay

HIID Hearing Impairment including Deafness

ITWD Infant Toddler with a Disability

ELA English Language Acquisition

ELC Early Learning Center

ELL English Language Learner

ESY Extended School Year

FAPE Free Appropriate Public Education

FERPA Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

GT Gifted and Talented

IDEA Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act

IEP Individualized Educational Plan

IFSP Individual Family Service Plan

IHCP Individual Health Care Plan

ID Intellectually Disabled

LEA Local Education Agency

LEP Limited English Proficiency

LRE Least Restrictive Environment

MD Multiple Disabilities

OCR Office of Civil Rights

ODD Oppositional Defiant Disorder

OI Orthopedically Impaired

OHI Other Health Impaired

OT Occupational Therapy

PD Physical Disability

SED Serious Emotional Disability

SLD Specific Learning Disability

SLI Speech Language Impairment

TBI Traumatic Brain Injury

VIB Visual Impairment including Blindness