



A Parent's Guide to Special Education: Understanding Your Rights & The Referral Process

Wallingford Public Schools is dedicated to partnering with families to ensure every child receives the support they need to thrive. Under the federal law known as the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, you and your child are guaranteed specific rights.

Here is what you need to know about how we find, evaluate, and support students who may need special education services.

1. Child Find: Our Promise to Locate Help Early

Under IDEA's **Child Find** mandate, our district is legally responsible for locating, identifying, and evaluating all children from birth through age 22 who may have a disability—no matter how mild or severe.

This protection extends to **all** children, including those who are:

- Enrolled in public, private, or religious schools (even if living outside the district).
- Homeschooled.
- In foster care or are wards of the state.
- Experiencing homelessness or belonging to migrant families.
- Advancing from grade to grade but still struggling with hidden academic or behavioral challenges.

2. General Education Supports (RTI)

Before making a formal referral, schools often try to help students using a system called **Response to Intervention (RTI)**. This provides targeted, tiered academic or behavioral support within the general education classroom.

⚠ Important IDEA Protection: While RTI is incredibly helpful, **it cannot be used to delay or deny your right to a special education evaluation**. A referral can be made at any time, even if your child is currently receiving RTI support.

3. How to Refer Your Child for an Evaluation

An **Appropriate Evaluation** is a core pillar of IDEA. If you suspect your child has a disability that impacts their learning, you have the right to request a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary evaluation at no cost to you.

- **Who can refer?** Parents/guardians, school staff, adult students, or healthcare professionals (with your permission).
- **How to do it:** You do *not* need to know special legal terms or fill out complicated forms. A simple written request—such as an email or letter to your school principal outlining your concerns—is enough. If you need assistance writing it down, school staff will help you.
- **What happens next?** Once the school receives your written referral, **you will be notified within 5 school days**. The district will then schedule a **Planning and Placement Team (PPT)** meeting to discuss your concerns and decide what evaluations are needed.

4. Infants and Toddlers (Birth to Age 3)

For our youngest learners, the state operates the **Birth to Three System**. If you have concerns about a toddler under age 3:

- The district will help connect you and refer your family to the Birth to Three System.
- IDEA requires that if a child is eligible for special education, a school plan must be active and ready to start **no later than their third birthday**, even if that birthday falls during the summer break.
- **Transition Planning:** As your child approaches age 3, we participate in 90-day transition planning meetings and assign a dedicated district contact person to guide you through changing from an **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)** to a school-based **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**.

5. Your Right to Participate & Decision-Making

IDEA strictly protects **Parent Participation**. You are an equal, essential member of the team. You have the right to:

- Participate in every PPT meeting where your child's eligibility, evaluation, and education are discussed.
- Provide input on your child's **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**—the customized plan detailing their specialized goals, accommodations, and services.
- Ensure your child is educated in the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**, meaning they will learn alongside peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate.

6. Procedural Safeguards & Special Circumstances

IDEA includes strict rules to protect your family's rights, known as **Procedural Safeguards**. These rules ensure transparency, parental consent, and a way to resolve disagreements fairly.

- **Surrogate Parents:** In unique situations where a child's parents are unavailable, unknown, or the child is a ward of the state, the district will request a state-appointed surrogate parent to step in. This ensures the child's educational rights are fully protected at every step.
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Questions? We Are Here to Help!

You never have to navigate this process alone. Detailed information, resources, and referral forms are available at every school building and on our district website.

If you have questions or want to start a referral, please reach out directly to your **school's principal or the Pupil Personnel Office @ (203) 294-5946**. Together, we will ensure your child gets the support they need to thrive!