



RUDOLPH ADVOCACY WORKS

Understanding Special Education

Participant Resource Packet

A guide for foster, adoptive & kinship families

Use this workbook before, during, and after the webinar to capture what matters most for the child in your care.

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“Helping families confidently navigate schools while building positive partnerships.”

Welcome

A warm place to organize your thoughts before, during, and after the webinar

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING TODAY

This is practical training, not legal training. Your goal is confidence - not perfection. Use the packet in whatever way supports you best.

How to use this packet

BEFORE

Complete the readiness page. Gather records, note current concerns, and circle the topics you most want clarified.

DURING

Follow the slide numbers, fill in key words, and use the open spaces for examples, questions, and personal connections.

AFTER

Choose a few realistic next steps. Save this packet with school records and return to it before future meetings.

What I most hope to understand today

A question I want answered

My Starting Point

Slides 2-5 | Welcome, shared challenges, and today's goal

1

You are not alone

New schools, trauma, missing records, learning gaps, behavioral concerns, mental health needs, and frequent transitions can make school especially complex.

- ☐ I have attended an IEP meeting.
- ☐ The child in my care currently has a 504 Plan.
- ☐ I have heard terms such as FAPE, IDEA, or MTSS.
- ☐ I have left a school meeting feeling more confused than when I arrived.

The strengths I want the school team to recognize

The school concern that feels most urgent right now

One thing that would help me feel more confident

How Schools Support Students

Slides 6-7 | Begin with the least intensive support that meets the need

2

The support pathway

Every child begins in general education. Schools increase support as a student's individual needs increase.

Level 1:

Level 2:

Level 3:

Level 4:

COMMON GENERAL EDUCATION SUPPORTS

Reading or math intervention • small groups • behavior check-ins • counseling • homework support • graphic organizers • preferential seating • teacher conferences

Supports already tried - and what happened

Data or examples I want to gather

Unique Challenges & MTSS

Slides 8-10 | Understanding context, intervention, and the pivot point

3

Context matters

Multiple schools, missing records, trauma and attachment, and an unclear educational history do not automatically mean special education is needed - but concerns should be taken seriously.

MTSS stands for

MTSS is a framework, not a

TIER 1

Support for everyone

TIER 2

Some students need more support

TIER 3

Intensive intervention

Signs that current supports may not be enough

Questions I have about intervention data or progress

Two Different Paths

Slides 11-13 | IEPs provide specialized instruction; 504 Plans support access

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IEP or 504 Plan?

Both can be appropriate. They solve different problems.

SPECIAL EDUCATION (IEP)

Provides specialized instruction to meet unique educational needs.

IEP may include

SECTION 504

Focuses on equal access to general education by removing disability-related barriers.

504 may include

Examples of accommodations that might reduce barriers

What I still need to clarify about these two paths

My key takeaway

How a Child Gets an IEP

Slides 14-18 | From evaluation request to services

5

Special education and eligibility

An IEP is the written plan explaining how specialized instruction and related supports will address a student's unique educational needs.

1

Evaluation request

2

Assessment plan

3

Parent consent

4

Evaluations

5

Eligibility meeting

6

IEP developed

7

Services begin

CRUCIAL RULE

A diagnosis alone does not automatically qualify a student. The disability must affect educational performance and create a need for specialized instruction.

My question about evaluation or eligibility

Inside an IEP

Slides 19-20 | Eight core parts and the foundation of the plan

1 Present levels

2 Goals

3 Services

4 Accommodations

5 Placement

6 Progress reports

7 Extended school year

8 Transportation

PRESENT LEVELS = THE BASELINE

This section answers: Where is my child today? It should describe strengths, needs, academic data, behavior, communication, and social skills. Everything else should grow from this picture.

A strength or talent that belongs in present levels

A need, challenge, or data point that belongs in present levels

Something in the current IEP I want to review

Goals, Services & Progress

Slides 21-22 | Make the plan specific enough to monitor

6

Measurable goals

A strong goal explains the starting point, destination, measurement method, and review timeline.

Where are we now?

Where are we going?

How will progress be measured?

When will it be reviewed?

EXAMPLE

Stronger: Increase oral reading fluency from 45 to 85 words per minute with 95% accuracy. Weaker: Will improve reading.

A service I want to understand better (speech, OT, counseling, behavior, SAI, APE, transportation)

How and when I expect progress to be reported

My question for the team

Accommodations, Modifications & LRE

Slides 23-24 | How, what, and where a student learns

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Know the difference

An accommodation changes how a student learns. A modification changes what the student is expected to learn.

Accommodation = changes

Modification = changes

EXAMPLES

Accommodations: extra time, visual schedule, breaks. Modifications: reduced curriculum or different academic expectations.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The goal is the most inclusive setting where the child can be successful. Placement is a continuum, not a one-size-fits-all decision.



What setting and supports help this child participate and make progress?

Trauma, Learning & Behavior

Slides 25-26 | Look beneath behavior for the unmet need or message

8

Behavior is communication

Trauma can affect attention, memory, executive functioning, emotional regulation, relationships, and learning. Sometimes behavior is the symptom - not the problem.

SHIFT THE QUESTION

Instead of: "What is wrong with this child?" Ask: "What is this child trying to communicate?"

- ☐ Escape or avoidance
- ☐ Attention or connection
- ☐ Sensory needs
- ☐ Frustration or fear
- ☐ Confusion
- ☐ Communication challenges

A behavior I want to understand with greater curiosity

What happens before, during, and after the behavior?

A regulation, relationship, or learning support we could try

When to Request an Evaluation

Slide 27 | Notice patterns, document concerns, and trust your instincts

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Possible reasons to ask

Concerns may be academic, developmental, behavioral, emotional, communication-related, or a combination.

- ☐ Academic struggles or slow progress
- ☐ Reading or math concerns
- ☐ Fine-motor or developmental concerns
- ☐ Behavior or emotional regulation
- ☐ Communication concerns
- ☐ Anxiety or school refusal
- ☐ Repeated suspensions

Specific examples, dates, work samples, or data I have

Supports already attempted and the response

My evaluation request question

Questions Every Family Can Ask

Slide 28 | Keep meetings focused on evidence, options, and next steps

What data supports that decision?

How will we measure progress?

What options were considered?

What happens if progress is not made?

What should I expect to see before our next meeting?

Can you explain that in everyday language?

My child-specific question #1

My child-specific question #2

Terms or decisions I want explained

Before the Meeting

Slide 29 | Prepare the records, people, and questions that help you participate

10

Essential preparation

A short written agenda can help you stay centered when a meeting covers many topics.

Bring or prepare

- ☐ Notebook or this packet
- ☐ Questions and priorities
- ☐ Calendar
- ☐ Progress reports
- ☐ Outside evaluations
- ☐ Work samples
- ☐ A support person, if helpful

My top three priorities for this meeting

People attending and their roles

Information I need before the meeting

During & After the Meeting

Slides 30-31 | Participate actively, then track commitments and progress

DURING

- ☐ Listen and take notes
- ☐ Ask questions and clarify unfamiliar words
- ☐ Request a break if needed
- ☐ Ask for copies
- ☐ Stay collaborative without feeling pressured

AFTER

- ☐ Review the IEP or 504 Plan
- ☐ Highlight action items
- ☐ Calendar follow-ups
- ☐ Track progress and save emails
- ☐ Celebrate growth

Decisions made

Who will do what - and by when

Follow-up questions

Red Flags & Productive Collaboration

Slides 32-34 | Take concerns seriously while keeping the focus on solutions

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Watch patterns over time

Repeated suspensions, frequent behavior calls, school avoidance, frequent school changes, little academic progress, delayed evaluations, “wait and see,” or no measurable progress deserve attention.

What I am noticing

- ☐ Behavior or attendance pattern
- ☐ Academic progress concern
- ☐ Delay or unclear timeline
- ☐ No measurable progress
- ☐ Frequent school transition

A COLLABORATIVE MINDSET

Approach meetings with curiosity. Ask questions before assuming. Document respectfully, disagree professionally, and focus on solutions rather than blame.

The concern I want to state clearly and respectfully

The solution or next step I want the team to consider

Glossary A-M

Plain-language definitions for commonly used school terms

Accommodation	A change in how a student accesses instruction, demonstrates learning, or participates; it does not change the learning standard.
Assessment / Evaluation	A process using multiple sources of information to understand needs and determine whether a student qualifies for special education.
APE	Adapted Physical Education - specially designed physical education for a student who needs it.
Eligibility	The team's determination of whether a student meets legal criteria and needs special education and related services.
ESY	Extended School Year - special education services beyond the regular school year when required for a student to receive FAPE.
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education - an individualized education designed to meet disability-related needs at no cost to the family.
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act - the federal special education law.
IEP	Individualized Education Program - the written special education plan describing present levels, goals, services, supports, and placement.
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment - educating a student with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.
Modification	A change in what a student is expected to learn or demonstrate.
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports - a framework for increasing academic, behavioral, or social-emotional support based on need and response.

Glossary O-S

More terms you may hear in IEP and Section 504 meetings

OHI	Other Health Impairment - an IDEA eligibility category that can include ADHD when criteria are met.
OT	Occupational Therapy - a related service supporting skills such as fine-motor, sensory, or daily school participation needs.
Parent / Educational Rights Holder	The person legally authorized to make educational decisions. In foster care, this may require confirmation; caregiving and educational decision-making roles are not always the same.
Placement	The setting or continuum of settings where IEP services are delivered; it is determined after needs, goals, and services are identified.
Present Levels	The IEP's description of current academic achievement and functional performance, including strengths and needs.
Progress Monitoring	Regular collection and review of data showing whether supports or goals are working.
Related Services	Supports needed to benefit from special education, such as speech-language therapy, OT, counseling, or transportation.
SAI	Specialized Academic Instruction - specially designed teaching tailored to a student's IEP needs.
Section 504	A federal civil-rights law prohibiting disability discrimination; a 504 Plan documents supports that provide equal access.
Specially Designed Instruction	Teaching adapted in content, method, or delivery to address disability-related educational needs.
PTI	Parent Training and Information Center - a federally funded organization that helps families understand special education rights and processes.

My Webinar Reflection

Slides 35-36 | Turn information into confidence and a few clear next steps

THREE THINGS TO REMEMBER

You do not have to understand everything today. Ask questions until things make sense. You are an important member of the IEP team.

My three key takeaways

A question I still have

Something that changed or confirmed my thinking

One strength I bring to school partnerships

One small step I can take this week

Post-Webinar Action Plan

Choose only the steps that fit your child, role, and current situation

- ☐ Create one folder for IEPs, 504 Plans, evaluations, progress reports, emails, and work samples.
- ☐ Build a simple timeline of schools, meetings, concerns, interventions, and progress.
- ☐ Write down current strengths and the top one or two concerns.
- ☐ Ask what data the school is collecting and when the team will review it.
- ☐ Review the current IEP or 504 Plan and highlight unclear language or missing information.
- ☐ Request a meeting or evaluation if concerns and evidence support that step.
- ☐ Identify a support person, PTI, or advocate if additional help would be useful.
- ☐ Calendar the next progress check and celebrate growth along the way.

My first action

Who can help me

Target date

Resources

Trusted starting points for continued learning and family support

Foster the Family

Community and support for foster, adoptive, and kinship families.

<https://www.fosterthefamily.org>

Rudolph Advocacy Works

Educational advocacy, meeting preparation, and plan review.

<https://www.rudolphadvocacyworks.org>

Wrightslaw

Special education law and advocacy information.

<https://www.wrightslaw.com>

Understood

Practical learning and attention resources for families.

<https://www.understood.org>

Center for Parent Information & Resources

Find your state's Parent Training and Information Center.

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center>

U.S. Department of Education - IDEA

Federal information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea>

Office for Civil Rights - Section 504

Federal disability-discrimination and Section 504 information.

<https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/disability-discrimination>

A NOTE ABOUT ROLES AND RIGHTS

For children in foster care, confirm who holds educational decision-making rights and who should receive notices. This packet provides general educational information, not legal advice; timelines and procedures can vary by state.

Local or state resource I want to add