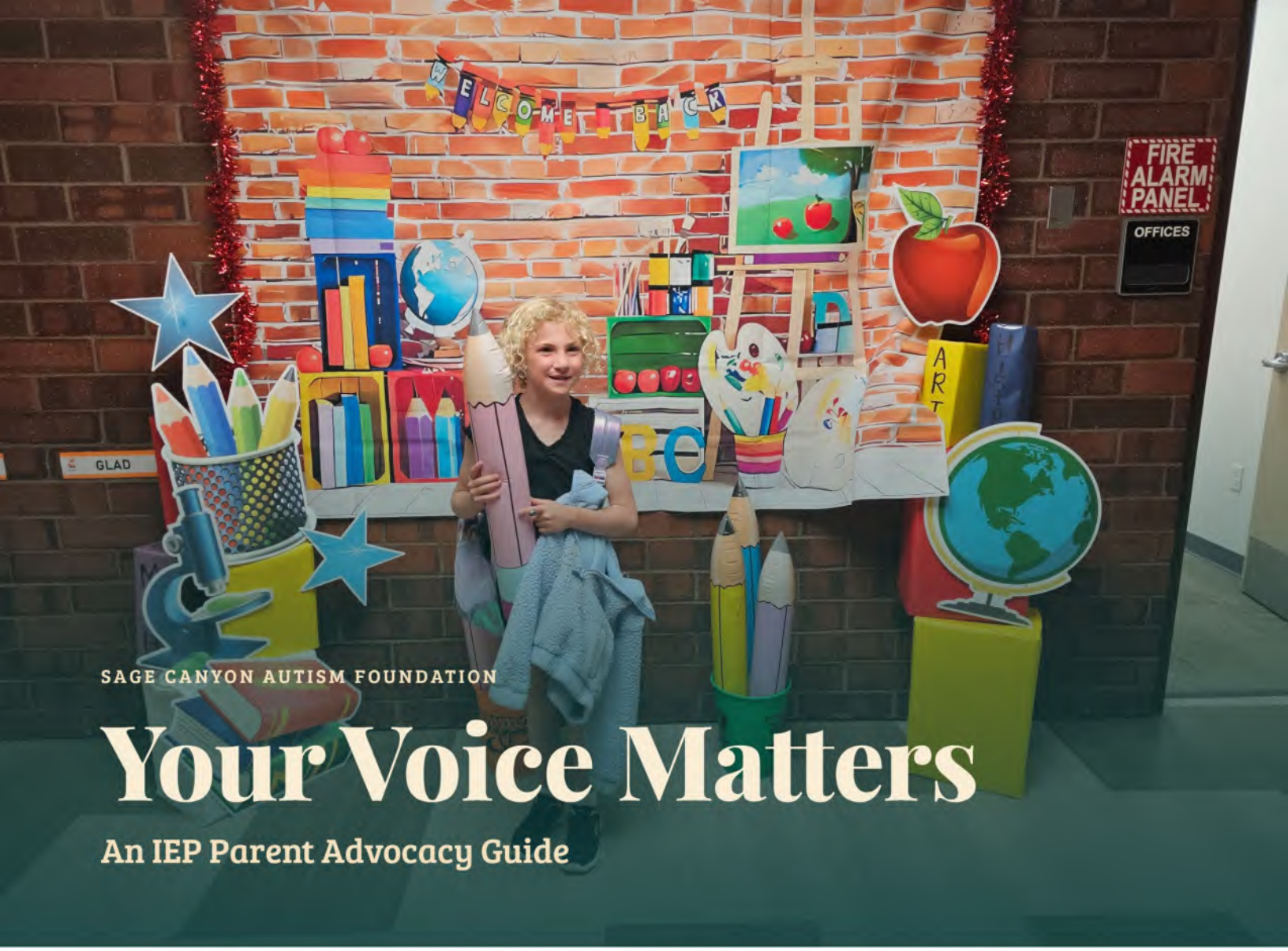


SAGE CANYON AUTISM FOUNDATION

Your Voice Matters

An IEP Parent Advocacy Guide

A practical resource for preparing for meetings, asking questions, understanding your rights, and advocating for the educational support your child needs.

You do not have to be an expert in special education to be an important and effective member of your child's IEP team.

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START HERE

Your Role Matters

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is meant to describe the instruction, services, supports, and accommodations a student needs to access and make progress in school. Parents are essential members of the team because they know their child's strengths, communication, needs, history, and day-to-day experiences.

You do not need to know every law or use special terminology to participate. You can ask questions, request explanations, share what you observe, disagree with a proposal, and ask the team to explain how it reached a decision.



What to keep in mind

- **You are an equal IEP team member.** Your perspective should be part of the discussion and decision-making process.
- **The IEP is an individualized plan.** Supports should be based on your child's unique needs—not simply on what is routinely available.
- **Written plans matter.** If a support is important, discuss whether it belongs in the IEP and how it will be implemented.
- **Ask for specifics.** Who will do what, when, how often, and how will the team know whether it is working?
- **You can take time.** You do not have to resolve every disagreement or make every decision during one meeting.

A note about this guide

This guide offers general information about IDEA and IEP advocacy. It is not legal advice and does not replace advice from a qualified special education attorney or advocate. State procedures and individual circumstances can affect how rights and timelines apply.

A USEFUL STARTING POINT

"I want us to work together on a plan that helps my child access learning, feel safe and supported, and make meaningful progress."

SECTION 1

Understanding FAPE

FAPE stands for Free Appropriate Public Education. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), eligible students are entitled to special education and related services provided at public expense and in conformity with an IEP.

The standard is an education reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances. The IEP should be ambitious and appropriately challenging, while taking the student's individual needs into account.

In practice, an appropriate educational program may include

- Access to appropriate instruction and the curriculum, with supports or modifications as individually needed.
- Special education and related services designed around the student's identified needs.
- Measurable annual goals, a clear way to monitor progress, and periodic progress reporting.
- Accommodations, assistive technology, communication supports, and sensory or regulation supports when needed for educational access.
- Behavioral supports that address barriers to learning and participation.
- Placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE)—with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate to the student's needs.

FAPE is more than attendance or supervision

A student being physically present at school does not, by itself, mean the student is receiving an appropriate education. Consider whether the student can participate in instruction, build skills, access peers and school activities, receive services, and make progress toward IEP goals.

Questions to ask

- What are the most important educational needs the IEP is designed to address?
- How will the proposed services and supports help my child make progress?
- What data will show whether the plan is working?
- Is my child able to access instruction, peers, activities, and related services?

KEEP IN MIND

FAPE is not determined by what is easiest or most convenient for the school. The plan should be based on the student's individual needs and the information available to the IEP team.



SECTION 2

Preparing for the Meeting

A little preparation can make it easier to stay focused and ensure that important concerns are addressed. You do not need to prepare a lengthy presentation. A short list of priorities is often enough.

Before the meeting

- Review the current IEP, recent progress reports, evaluations, and any proposed changes.
- Write down your top three to five concerns or priorities.
- Gather relevant examples: communication from school, work samples, incident information, or observations from home and community settings.
- Think about your child's strengths, interests, communication, preferences, and what helps them feel regulated and ready to learn.
- Request copies of records or data you need to review in advance.
- Consider inviting someone who knows your child or can support you in the meeting.

During the meeting

- Ask the team to explain unfamiliar terms, data, or recommendations.
- Connect concerns to educational impact: access to instruction, participation, progress, communication, safety, or services.
- Ask how proposed supports will work in real situations and across settings.
- Take notes, especially when the team makes a decision or agrees to an action item.
- If you need time to review a proposal, say so and ask what the next steps and timelines will be.

SECTION 2 · CONTINUED

Helpful Questions to Bring

- What does my child do well, and what interests or motivates them?
- What are the biggest barriers to learning and participation right now?
- What supports are working? How do we know?
- What needs to change, and how will we measure whether the change helps?
- Who is responsible for each support, and how will staff know what to do?



A PRACTICAL TIP

Try bringing a written list of priorities. If the conversation gets pulled in several directions, you can return to it: "I want to make sure we address the concerns I brought today."

WORKSHEET

My top priorities for this meeting

1

2

3

4

5

SECTION 3

Areas to Discuss and Monitor

The following areas can help you organize questions. Not every item will apply to every student. Focus on the supports your child needs to access education and make progress.

IEP implementation

- Are the services, accommodations, and supports in the IEP actually being provided?
- Who is responsible for each support? How are staff, substitutes, and paraprofessionals informed?
- How does the school monitor implementation and address missed services?



Staffing and consistency

- Are there enough appropriately trained staff to implement the IEP safely and consistently?
- What happens when a primary staff member is absent or reassigned?
- How are staff trained, supervised, and kept informed about the student's communication and support needs?

Behavior, communication, and regulation

- What tends to happen before the student becomes distressed or behavior escalates?
- Have communication, sensory, medical, environmental, task, and transition factors been considered?
- Does the Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), if there is one, include proactive supports and teach useful skills—not only consequences?
- Do staff recognize early signs of distress and know how to respond?

SECTION 3 · CONTINUED

Access, Participation, and Progress

Educational access and participation

- How much time is the student spending in the classroom and participating in instruction?
- Are they missing instruction, recess, peer interaction, or related services?
- How are breaks or alternative settings used, and how is the student supported to return to learning?
- Is the current placement meeting the student's needs in the least restrictive environment?



Progress and accountability

- Are goals measurable and connected to the student's identified needs?
- What do progress-monitoring data show—not just general impressions?
- Who will follow up on each concern, by what date, and how will the family be updated?

KEEP IN MIND

Ask for specifics. Who will do what, when, how often, and how will the team know whether it is working?

SECTION 4

When Behavior and Safety Are Part of the Conversation

Behavior can communicate distress, unmet needs, confusion, pain, overload, difficulty with transitions, or a mismatch between expectations and available support. Looking beyond the behavior helps the team identify what may be contributing to it and what can prevent it.

A useful discussion includes

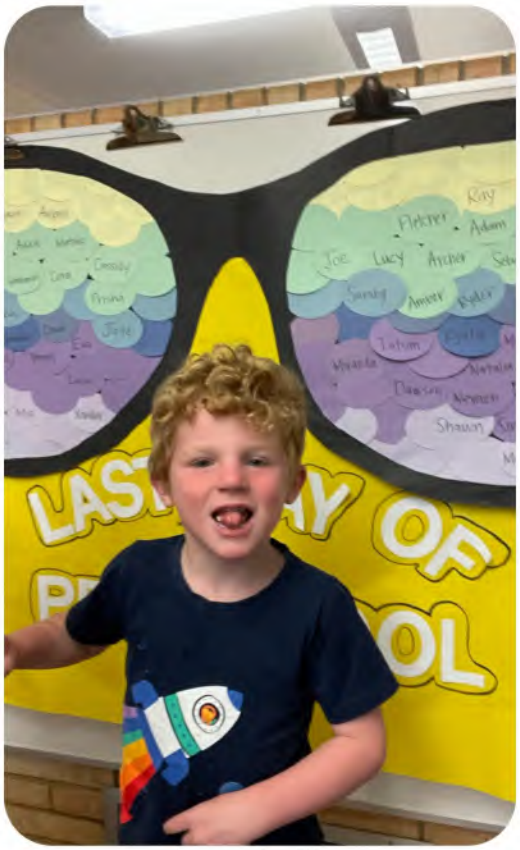
- **Understanding patterns:** What happens before, during, and after an incident? Are there patterns across tasks, people, times, or environments?
- **Considering context:** Have communication access, sensory needs, health factors, fatigue, task demands, predictability, and relationships been considered?
- **Proactive support:** What can be changed in the environment or routine to reduce distress and support participation?
- **Teaching and access:** What communication, coping, self-advocacy, or other skills can be supported in meaningful ways?
- **Staff preparation:** Are the adults supporting the student trained and able to implement the plan consistently?
- **Reviewing data:** Is the plan helping? What evidence will prompt the team to adjust it?



SECTION 4 · CONTINUED

If the School Raises Safety Concerns

Take safety seriously while also asking how the student's access to education will be protected. A safety concern should lead to individualized planning, appropriate supports, and careful review—not an automatic assumption that exclusion is the only option.



Questions you can ask

- What specific risk are you concerned about, and what information supports that concern?
- What has been tried to prevent the situation, and how consistently was it implemented?
- What additional assessment, training, staffing, or environmental changes may be needed?
- If my child is removed from an activity or setting, how will instruction and IEP services continue?
- How will the team review whether the response is effective and whether my child is losing access to education?

A HELPFUL REMINDER

"I take safety seriously. I also want us to understand what is driving the situation and identify supports that allow my child to participate and learn."

SECTION 5

When Conversations Get Difficult

You can stay collaborative while still asking the team to explain its decisions and responsibilities. These sample responses are starting points—adapt them to your family's situation.

IF YOU HEAR...	YOU MIGHT RESPOND...
"We don't have enough staff."	"I understand staffing can be challenging. What is the plan to ensure the IEP is implemented and my child receives the services and supports they need?"
"We can't guarantee a consistent para."	"How will training, communication, and consistency be maintained across staff, including substitutes?"
"He is being unsafe."	"I take safety seriously. What proactive supports are being used, and what does the information tell us about what is contributing to the incidents?"
"We've tried everything."	"Can you show me what has been tried, how consistently it was implemented, and what the data show?"
"That's just how the student behaves."	"What might the behavior be communicating? Have we considered communication, sensory, environmental, and other unmet needs?"
"We don't have the resources for that."	"How does the team determine what is needed based on the student's individual needs and evaluations?"
"We already have a plan."	"How do we know the plan is working? What data demonstrate progress or improved access?"
"We need to send the student home for safety."	"What alternatives and supports were considered or attempted? How will educational services be addressed if my child is excluded?"
"We can discuss that later."	"Can we document this as an action item, identify who is responsible, and set a specific timeline for follow-up?"

KEEP IN MIND

You can ask for a specific answer without being confrontational. "Help me understand how that decision meets my child's needs" is a reasonable question.



SECTION 6

Know Your Rights

IDEA gives parents important rights in the special education process. The details and timelines can depend on the type of request and the circumstances, so ask the school to explain the applicable procedure in writing when needed.

- **You can request an IEP meeting** when you have concerns about your child's program.
- **You can request an evaluation** if you suspect your child may have a disability-related educational need. The school must follow IDEA's evaluation and consent procedures.
- **You may be able to request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)** at public expense if you disagree with an evaluation obtained by the school, subject to IDEA requirements.
- **You can request copies** of evaluations, progress reports, behavior data, incident reports, and relevant educational records, consistent with applicable records-access rules.
- **You do not have to agree** with every proposal made by the school. You can ask questions, express disagreement, and seek clarification about next steps.
- **You can bring an advocate** or another individual with knowledge or special expertise regarding your child to an IEP meeting.
- **You can provide written information or concerns** for the team to consider and ask that your input be included in the educational record.

SECTION 6 · CONTINUED

Prior Written Notice: When to Ask

What is it?

Prior Written Notice (PWN) is a formal written explanation the school must provide when it proposes or refuses to initiate or change a student's identification, evaluation, educational placement, or the provision of FAPE. The notice must be provided within a reasonable time before the school implements the proposed action or refusal, as required by IDEA.

When might it apply?

- The school refuses to evaluate your child.
- The school refuses a requested change to special education or related services, accommodations, or supports that concerns the provision of FAPE.
- The school proposes or refuses a change in educational placement or another action covered by IDEA's notice requirements.

What should PWN explain?

- The action proposed or refused and why the school made that decision.
- The evaluations, records, assessments, or reports used as the basis for the decision.
- Other options considered and why those options were rejected.
- Other factors relevant to the proposal or refusal.
- Information about procedural safeguards and sources parents can contact for help, as required.

YOU CAN SAY

"I understand the school is refusing this request. Please provide Prior Written Notice explaining the refusal, the information the team relied on, and the options considered."

PWN is the school's responsibility when IDEA requires it

Parents do not need to use a particular phrase to create the school's legal obligation. You can ask for notice during the meeting; you do not have to wait until the meeting ends.

SECTION 7

Before You Leave the Meeting

Before the meeting ends, take a few minutes to confirm what was decided and what happens next. If something remains unresolved, ask that it be clearly documented.

Meeting wrap-up checklist

- [ ] What changes, if any, are being made to the IEP?
- [ ] Who is responsible for each action item?
- [ ] How will implementation and progress be monitored?
- [ ] When will the team meet again to review progress or unresolved concerns?
- [ ] What additional evaluations, assessments, or data are needed?
- [ ] What is the timeline or due date for each action?
- [ ] How and when will parents receive updates?
- [ ] Were proposals, refusals, and disagreements documented? Is Prior Written Notice required?

Write down action items

ACTION / NEXT STEP	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?	BY WHEN?



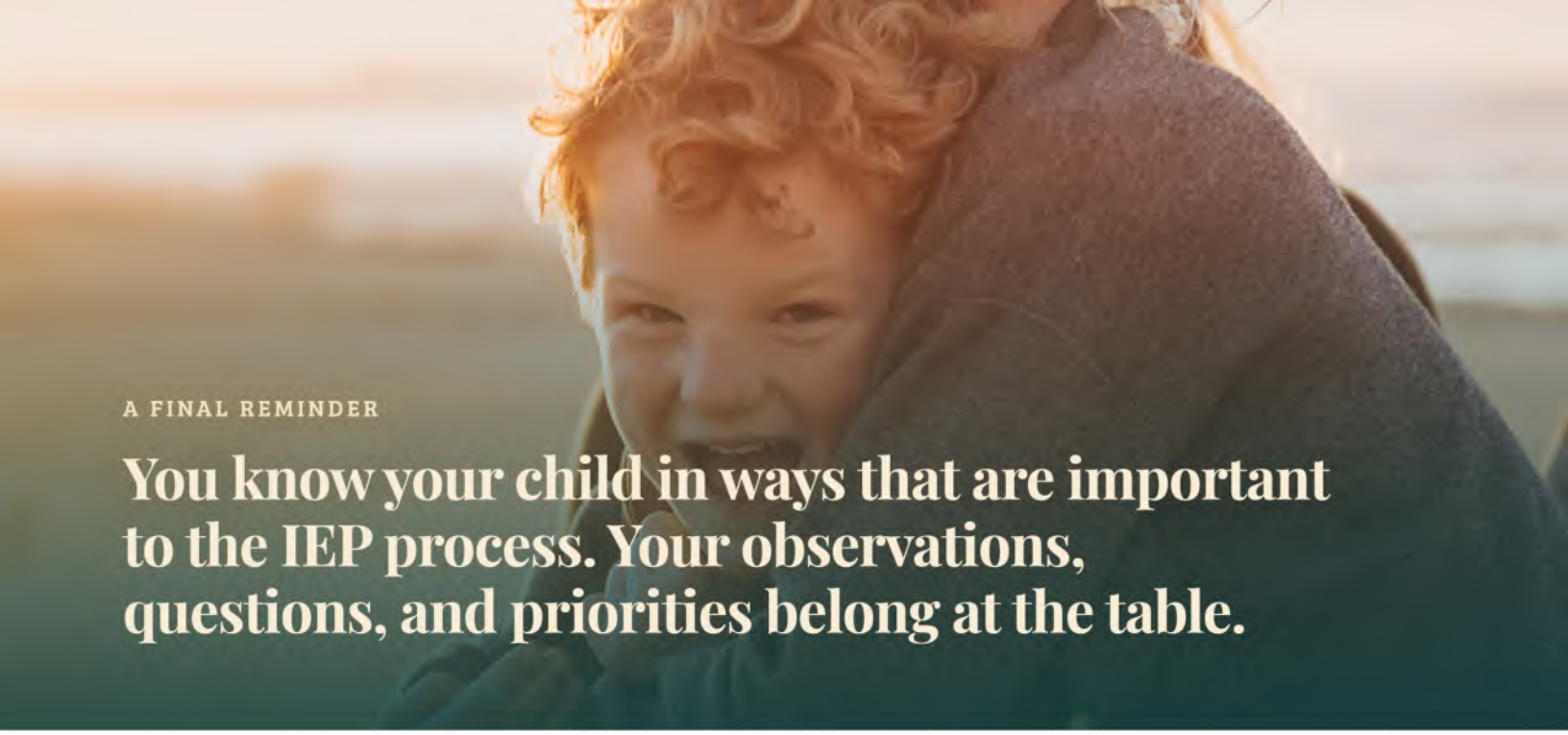
SECTION 7 · CONTINUED

After the Meeting

- Review the IEP and meeting notes when you receive them.
- Follow up in writing if you believe an important concern or agreement was left out.
- Keep copies of emails, notices, progress reports, and other relevant records.
- Monitor whether the agreed supports are being implemented and whether your child is making progress.

KEEP IN MIND

You do not have to resolve every disagreement in one meeting. It is okay to ask for clarification, request documentation, take time to review proposals, and follow up in writing.



A FINAL REMINDER

You know your child in ways that are important to the IEP process. Your observations, questions, and priorities belong at the table.

Advocacy does not have to mean conflict. It can mean asking thoughtful questions, requesting clear information, documenting concerns, and continuing to work toward a plan that recognizes your child as a whole person—not a list of challenges or behaviors.

Your child deserves an educational program that supports learning, communication, participation, safety, dignity, and meaningful progress.

YOU CAN SAY

"I understand the challenges the school is facing. My concern is making sure we are developing a plan around my child's individual needs rather than expecting my child to adapt to a system that isn't currently meeting those needs."

About Sage Canyon Autism Foundation

Sage Canyon Autism Foundation works to build connection, community, and belonging through accessible outdoor experiences, education, and support. We believe every person deserves opportunities for inclusion, meaningful participation, and a life shaped by their own interests and strengths.

Learn more: sagecanyonautism.org

This guide is intended for general educational purposes. It is not legal advice and does not create an attorney-client relationship. For help with a specific dispute or legal question, consider contacting a qualified special education advocate or attorney.